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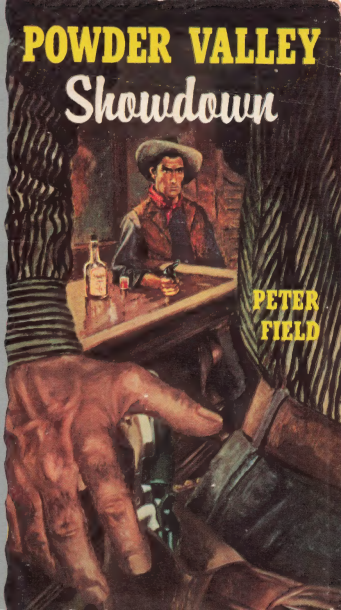


THE
COMPLETE
BOOK

POWDER VALLEY Showdown

PETER
FIELD

POCKET
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GUNPLAY... When lovely Joan

Wilcox came to Powder Valley from the East, no one expected gunplay to come with her.

Joan was looking for her father, who had traveled West years before. Sheriff Pat Stevens had to agree that the picture of her dad bore a striking resemblance to rancher Bill Freeman.

When Sheriff Stevens arrived at the Freeman spread, he found the old man lying motionless on his bunk. Bill Freeman was dead—murdered!

Was this vicious attack pure coincidence? Or was it tied in* with the beautiful girl? It would take all the guts, gunplay and savvy Stevens could muster to bring the case to a lead-spitting showdown!

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PETER FIELD

POWDER VALLEY
Showdown



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POWDER VALLEY SHOWDOWN

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Powder Valley

Showdown

1.

SHERIFF PAT STEVENS and his old partner, Sam Sloan, were playing two-handed casino in the small lean-to at the rear of the adobe jail. It was late afternoon, and very hot inside the low-roofed lean-to. The only sound was the slapping of cards on the table and an occasional mutter of disgust from Sam as Pat gathered in some aces, or the big or little casino.

It was very quiet outside on that hot summer afternoon also. The little cow-town of Dutch Springs dozed somnolently in the heat of the Colorado sun. Up the street in front of the Gold Eagle Saloon a half dozen saddled horses stamped and ineffectually swished their tails at the flies; and in front of Mr. Winters' General Store a freighter was lethargically loading supplies in the back of his lumber wagon, but these were the only signs of life visible in the little town.

Pat Stevens made a sweep with his last card that gave him an extra point and gathered in a number of spades. He grinned and said, "That'll make me cards an' spades, an' I've got big and little casino an' two aces besides."

Sam Sloan leaned forward to look at the score, and twisted his dark face into an ugly scowl. "That's enuff to put you out again. Three games in a row, dang it." He reluctantly got another dime out of his pants pocket and slapped it down in front of the sheriff.

Pat was expertly riffling the worn deck, leaning back in his chair with an infuriating grin on his bronzed face. "Pretty

soon I'll win enough to buy us both a drink. Want to try another?"

Sam shook his head. "I know when I'm beat." He shoved a sweaty and dust-stained Stetson back on his head and dragged out a red bandana to mop his forehead. "This ain't no way for two grown-up men tuh waste a hull afternoon."

Pat yawned and put the deck of cards down. "Shore enough, we're gettin' old," he agreed. "Never thought I'd see the day when I'd waste my talents on a marked deck for ten cents a game of casino." He got out a packet of brown papers and a sack of flake tobacco and began to build a cigarette.

He was a tall and muscular man, with quiet gray eyes and strong, weather-beaten features. He wore a gray cotton shirt, open at the throat and with sleeves rolled above the elbows, a pair of faded blue jeans and high-heeled boots. Hanging over the back of his chair was a wide cartridge belt sagging under the weight of a holstered .45.

His companion was short and thin and wiry, with a seamed countenance the color of tanned leather that has lain too long in the hot sun, a mouth that was much too big for his face, and brightly inquisitive eyes guarded by thatched brows and a network of tiny wrinkles.

Sam turned his head toward the open window behind him and listened intently. "Afternoon stage from Hopewell Junction is comin' in," he announced after a moment. "Wanta sashay over to tuh depot an' see who's on it?"

Pat Stevens thumbnailed a match and put fire to the crimped end of his cigarette. "I ain't that old yet," he said amiably. "When a man gets to where he watches for the stage to come in for excitement, he's ready for a new set of teeth and a young wife."

"My teeth are as good as ever an' I got a young wife," Sam Sloan snapped aggressively. The creak of the stage and the jangle of harness could be clearly heard through the open window now. The driver was putting on a burst of speed coming up Main Street, pulling up with a great shouting and clatter in front of the depot half a block from the courthouse square.

"You've been champin' at the bit ever since we got back from that trip over to Sanctuary Flat on the Western Slope," Pat observed calmly. "Whyn't you settle back and take it easy until Mr. Hazeltine deeds over that ranch between Ezra's an' mine that he promised to us for a bonus on that last job? Then you and Kitty can move in for the winter and we'll see about stocking the range. Maybe you an' Ezra an' me could slip off for a ride down to New México to look at the herd of she-stuff Colonel Mansfield wants to sell."

"I *am* takin' it easy," Sam muttered defensively. "I ain't hit a lick since we got back."

"But you're not enjoyin' it. You're as nervous and twitchy as a bull-snake on ice."

"I ain't used to settin' around," growled Sam. "You and Ezra, you both got ranches runnin' smooth an' you-all ain't bothered. I wanta get Kitty an' the baby settled down on a place of our own."

"Sure you do," Pat agreed comfortably. "And that place of Hazeltine's is going to be just right soon as it's ready. But you got a vacation coming after that Pony Express job in Denver. Relax an' be glad you're back in Powder Valley where you belong."

Sam snorted loudly and tugged his hat down over his eyes. He started to get up, then settled back with a frown, muttering, "Sounds like yo're gonna have company."

Pat nodded as the sound of solid footsteps neared the lean-to office along the board-walk outside. "Maybe it's one of the boys looking for a three-handed game of pitch."

"There's two of 'em," Sam announced, listening to the approaching footsteps. "One of 'em's a kid, sounds like. Some papa bringin' his boy in fer thuh sheriff to spank, I reckon. That's all a sheriff's needed for around these parts now."

The footsteps stopped outside the partly open door, and someone knocked on it. Pat frowned curiously at Sam as he called, "Come on in." It wasn't like any of the Powder Valley citizens to stand on the formality of knocking on the sheriff's door.

Pat rocked his chair forward flat on the floor and stared at

the tall stranger who opened the door. He was dressed up in city clothes, and quite obviously from the East. Pat and Sam both immediately put him down as a dude as they looked at his black derby, a tightly buttoned broadcloth coat and neatly creased trousers. But he had a strong face, with piercing black eyes and an aggressive, square jaw, and he said curtly, "I was told I would find the sheriff here."

Pat Stevens said, "That's me, Mister . . ."

"Munson. Paul Munson of Philadelphia." Mr. Munson stepped inside, drawing his companion into the doorway beside him.

Both Westerners pushed their chairs back hastily and got to their feet as they saw the girl framed in the doorway.

She was young and beautiful, and as much out of place in Powder Valley as an orchid in a nest of cacti. She wore white silk gloves and a rustly silk dress and a big garden hat with flowers on the brim, and she lowered a pink silk parasol as she stepped in out of the hot sunlight. She looked dainty and fragile, and there was a wistful smile on her face as though she was bewildered and frightened by the uncouthness of the West, but determined not to show it.

"Let me introduce Miss Joan Wilcox," Munson said, taking her arm in his big hand. "Also from Philadelphia . . . and my fiancée."

Miss Joan Wilcox had great blue eyes and a delightfully snub nose. She wrinkled her nose and looked from Sam Sloan to Pat. "Which one of you is Sheriff Stevens?"

"I am, Ma'm. Mighty glad to meet you. This here is my deputy, Sam Sloan." This was not strictly the legal truth, for Sam hadn't been a deputy for a couple of years, but Pat had a feeling that he should thus explain his friend's presence in his office. He stepped back and gestured toward the chair he had been sitting in, urged the girl politely, "Won't you sit down, Ma'm?"

She said, "Thank you, Mr. Sheriff, I will. The ride in the stagecoach from Hopewell Junction was frightfully fatiguing." She tripped forward and smiled up into Pat's eyes as he held out the chair for her, and seated herself composedly,

leaning back against the gunbelt and holster hanging on the back of the chair.

"I'll come to the point at once, Sheriff," Mr. Munson said, moving forward to stand beside the seated girl and thrusting both hands into the side pockets of his coat with the thumbs resting on the outside. "Miss Wilcox has come all the way from the East in the hope of finding her father whom she has not seen for many years. His name is William Wilcox, and it is our understanding that he is a rancher here in Powder Valley. Has been settled here for a matter of ten years."

Pat Stevens glanced at Sam and cleared his throat with a negative shake of his head. "I'm right sorry to disappoint you, Ma'm, but there ain't nobody in Powder Valley named Wilcox. I've been here more'n ten years and know every man, woman and jackrabbit in the Valley."

"You don't understand," Munson broke in impatiently. "He won't be using that name here. We know he is living incognito."

"Sho' now," said Pat with a sympathetic glance at the girl. "Hidin' out from the law, is he? I'm right sorry, Ma'm. Might be best if you didn't do too much talking to the sheriff, don't you reckon? What I don't know ain't none of my business."

Her short upper lip trembled and her blue eyes became round and pleading. "He isn't hiding from the law. Daddy never did anything wrong in his whole life. It's just that he . . . well . . . he just ran away from the city and . . . and from Mother." She lifted her chin bravely and made her voice stronger. "And I don't blame him really. He loved the West and Mother insisted that we live in Philadelphia. I guess Daddy hated it until he finally just went away."

"I hardly think the sheriff will be interested in those private affairs," Munson interrupted smoothly. "It's sufficient for him to know that your father left his home more than a decade ago and came West to establish himself here under a new name. We want you to help Miss Wilcox find her father, Sheriff."

"I'll be plumb glad to help. What name did you say he was using herè?"

"We didn't say. That's the rub, Sheriff. We don't know," Munson admitted. "We know he settled here some ten years ago. Presumably he is still here, though in all that time he has not communicated once with his wife and daughter."

"Let me explain it, Paul," Joan Wilcox said softly, laying her gloved hand on his arm. "My father was originally from Texas, Mr. Stevens. He owned a large ranch there and was quite wealthy. He sold his ranch after he married Mother, and they went East. I was nine years old when he left. Mother told me terrible things about him, that he had disgraced us by going away like that and deserting his family, that I must never think or speak of him again—and all this time I thought she'd never heard from him, that he was probably dead, and I tried to forget him."

"Mother died last month," the girl went on evenly, "and on her deathbed she confessed to me that she'd had a letter from him ten years ago bearing the postmark of Dutch Springs, Colorado. In that letter he told her he had bought a ranch in Powder Valley and taken a new name. He didn't tell her the name, but he did ask her to write to a Mr. Winters in Dutch Springs if she ever wanted to get in touch with him, and he begged her to let me come to visit him after I grew older."

"She never answered his letter, and never told me a single word about it until last month. Now, I want to find my father."

"Mr. Winters," Pat told her, "runs the store and postoffice here in Dutch Springs. He's been here longer'n anybody and he's one of the closest-mouthed men I ever knew. He's kept your father's secret good all these years, but I reckon all we'll have to do is go over and tell him who you are and he'll put you straight."

Sam Sloan cleared his throat and reminded Pat, "Winters ain't in town today. He went to Pueblo on a buyin' trip yesterday an' won't be back till the end of the week."

"That's right," Pat agreed. "He is in Pueblo for a couple of days. We got a right nice hotel in town, Ma'm. You'd best put up there for a couple of days till Mr. Winters gets back."

"There's one other chance to locate him," said Munson. "We have a picture of Mr. Wilcox taken when Joan was four years old. We hoped someone in the Valley might recognize him from it."

He dug into his side pocket as he spoke and drew out a thin metal plate some three by five inches in size. It was a faded tintype of a man and woman and child. The man was standing stiffly beside a chair with his hand resting on his wife's shoulder. She was seated, with a small child in her arms.

The man was broad-shouldered, with sweeping mustaches, beetling brows and a high forehead. He looked stern and unhappy. The woman had a small, tight mouth and sharply patrician features. She looked like the sort of woman a Westerner might be glad to escape from. The little girl sitting on her lap had an animated, happy expression in contrast to the self-conscious poses of her parents.

Pat took the tintype from Munson and studied it carefully while Joan leaned forward and watched his face eagerly. He shook his head after a time, and passed the family portrait over to Sam, telling the eager girl, "I'm mighty sorry, Miss, but I don't recognize your Papa from that picture. Might be he changed some after it was taken."

"Tell you what," said Sam excitedly. "Shave off them mustaches an' dress him up in a old shirt an' a big floppy hat an' by golly you'd have ol' Bill Freeman when he was younger. Take a look at it, Pat. Hold your finger over his mouth like this. Don't that look like Bill?"

He held the tintype out with his finger covering the lower portion of William Wilcox's face.

Pat frowned at the result while Joan half arose from her chair and pressed forward in her eagerness.

Pat nodded slowly. "It sort of does look like Bill," he admitted slowly. "Let's see, Sam. When was it he bought that ranch off of Perry Hanfield?"

"Right about ten years ago. I recollect it was some before Ezra an' me started our hawse ranch up the Valley from him. Yessir, Pat, it was right on ten years ago. An' I'll tell

you somethin' else too. Bill Freeman paid cash on the barrel-head to Hanfield. An' he sent down to Texas fer a herd of heifers to stock it."

"That's right," Pat agreed. "Bill does claim to be from down Texas-way. But I never heard him mention no time spent back East."

"He wouldn't," said Joan eagerly. "Don't you see? Of course he wouldn't. That was a part of his life he was determined to forget. What did you say his name is?"

"Freeman. Bill Freeman. Runs a big spread over on the southern slope of the Valley. The Four-V's outfit. That's his brand, Miss." Pat hesitated a moment, then went on gently, "If Sam and me are right, Miss Wilcox, and Bill Freeman is really your Daddy, you've got a mighty fine one. One of the straightest ranchers in the whole Valley, and mighty-near the best liked, I reckon. Bill's a real good rancher too. The Four-V's is one of the biggest spreads in the Valley. Of course, we can't rightly say for sure he is the man in this picture. Looks like he might be, and the time he come fits in."

"And his name," said Paul Munson excitedly. "Bill Freeman. Bill stands for William, of course. It's natural for a man to keep his first name. And Freeman! Do you get it, Joan? Free man. That's what he felt like when he got away from the city and back to the business he loved. What's that brand of his, Mr. Stevens? Did you say it was four V's?"

"That's right. Four V's side by side with the tops touching. It looks like this." Pat illustrated the brand with a pencil on a sheet of paper, setting down four uniform V's in a row.

Paul Munson chuckled heartily as he looked down at the brand. "I'd say your father has a sense of humor, Joan. That could be a pair of W's just as well as four V's. Your father used his original initials when he selected a brand for his new ranch."

"By golly," said Sam, "Mr. Munson shore is right about that brand. Two W's side by side jest as slick as yuh please. Only he called it the Four-V's an' nobody never looked at it diffrent."

"That settles it," said Munson, slipping his arm about

Joan's slender waist. "How can we get out to the ranch, Sheriff?"

"It's sort of late," said Pat dubiously, glancing out the window toward the setting sun. "It's a two hour drive out to it, and I sort of wonder if you'd best go without maybe preparing Bill a little bit. It's going to be an Almighty shock to have a pretty young lady come up unexpected an' tell him she's his daughter."

"What do you mean?" asked Joan sharply. "Is my father ill?"

"He's been sort of poorly the last few months. Nothing bad, reckon," Pat went on hastily to reassure her. "Got thrown from a bad bronc and strained his back awhile ago, and he hasn't been getting around good since then. And we're still just guessing that he's your Daddy."

"Dick Freeman an' the Four-V foreman, Clay Porter, are in town," said Sam Sloan. "I saw 'em at the Gold Eagle jest before I come down here, Pat."

"Dick Freeman?" said Munson sharply. "Who is that?"

"Bill Freeman's boy." Pat stopped suddenly with a look of bewilderment on his face. "Wait a minute, Miss Wilcox. You didn't say anything about having a brother maybe two or three years younger'n you."

"I haven't," she cried sharply. "I was an only child."

"Then Bill Freeman ain't the man you're lookin' for," Pat told her pityingly. "He's got a boy named Dick all of seventeen years old."

The girl from the East quivered as though she had been struck a blow, and sank back into her fiancé's arms with a little cry of hurt while two tears squeezed themselves out of her blue eyes.

2.

PAUL MUNSON'S RIGHT arm tightened about Joan's shoulders and he looked over her head angrily at Pat Stevens. "That was a cruel thing to do, Sheriff. Get her hopes up like that and then shatter them with a word."

"I'm right sorry," Pat said doggedly. "But I reckon it was better to shatter 'em right away than to let 'em get any higher. If her father didn't have any son, how can he be Bill Freeman?"

"I don't know," Munson admitted helplessly. He straightened Joan Wilcox up and got out a big white handkerchief with which he tenderly wiped away the tears from her eyes. "Try to think back, dear," he urged her. "You were a young girl when your father left home. Are you positive there wasn't a younger brother whom he took along with him?"

"Of course I'm positive," she flashed at him. "That is . . . well, I never *heard* of a brother. And it's too utterly preposterous to think there might have been one I didn't know about. After all, I was nine years old, Paul."

"I know. It's just that . . . everything seemed to fit so perfectly for this rancher named Bill Freeman to be your father. The time he located here, his being a Texan, the name of William Free-man, the brand he uses of two W's. Are you sure he has a son?" Munson demanded angrily of Pat.

"I told you. The boy's name is Dick Freeman, though I got to admit he sure doesn't take after his Daddy. Dick is lazy

and wild and always gettin' into trouble. Over a year ago I had to give strict orders to all the saloons in town not to sell Dick no whiskey. An' Bill had to clamp down on paying his gamblin' debts too."

Sam Sloan pushed back his big hat and scratched his sweating forehead thoughtfully. He drawled, "Yuh know somethin', Pat? I bin thinkin'."

Pat said, "Don't strain yoreself."

"I mean really," Sam protested. "Like you say, Dick Freeman shore don't look or act none like Bill's boy. Seems tuh me I heard onct that he wasn't. Not really."

"What do you mean by that?" Munson demanded.

"I'm tellin' yuh. I usta have a ranch near thuh Four-V's an' I knowed Bill Freeman real good. Even back in them days, Dick was a sort of heller, an' seems to me I recollect Bill tellin' me one day that Dick was only adopted."

His casual statement fell like a bombshell in the small office. Joan widened her eyes hopefully while Munson slammed his fist into his palm and exclaimed, "That would explain everything! It sounds plausible too. Cut off from his home and family; unable to marry again because he wasn't divorced from his first wife; it would be perfectly natural for Mr. Wilcox to take some orphan in and adopt him. That must be the explanation, Joan. Where can we find this boy, Sheriff?"

"Over to the Gold Eagle Saloon, I reckon. That's where he hangs out whenever he can get away from the ranch."

"Let's go see him at once. I'll talk to this boy. Certainly, he'll know whether Freeman is his real father, and whether his real name is Wilcox or not."

"I reckon so," Pat agreed. He stepped back to get his hat from a nail in the wall, got his gunbelt from the back of the chair and buckled it about his lean hips. Joan and Paul Munson preceded them outside, and Sam and Pat followed, pulling the door of the lean-to shut behind them.

The sun was down and it was already noticeably cooler outside. With the coming of evening, the village of Dutch Springs was beginning to throw off the lethargy of a hot day

and bestir itself. Two riders ambled down Main Street past the courthouse, and in the main business block beyond people were drifting out onto the board-walks to enjoy the cool evening air.

With her closed parasol in one gloved hand and the other resting lightly on her escort's arm, Joan tripped along lightly and eagerly beside her fiancé while Pat and Sam followed a few paces behind. Out here in the open air, with her chin lifted and her face turned up to the sky, the Eastern girl didn't seem as fragile as she had appeared at first. Her body was slender but there was a suggestion of lithe strength and vigor in the way she carried herself, and her indomitable spirit was evidenced by her eagerness to face the youth who called himself the son of the man she hoped was her father.

As they crossed the street and neared the saloon, Pat moved ahead to Joan's side and told her, "I'll go in the Gold Eagle an' bring Dick Freeman out, Miss Wilcox. Why don't you and Mr. Munson mosey on up to the Jewel Hotel with Sam? You can talk to Dick in the lobby there."

"That will be best, dear," Munson said as it seemed that Joan was about to demur. "We'll expect you in a few minutes, Sheriff."

Pat nodded to Sam, and turned aside through the swinging doors into the Gold Eagle. Three punchers stood at the bar, and the inevitable game of stud poker was in progress at a table at the rear.

One of the men at the bar was Clay Porter, foreman of the Four-V's spread. He was under thirty, as tall as Pat, with a smooth, hawklike face, lean-hipped and hard-muscled. He leaned on the bar with one elbow supporting him, and fiddled with a glass of whiskey.

He showed a double row of even white teeth in a slow smile and said, "Howdy, Sheriff," as Pat came toward him.

Pat said, "Evenin', Clay." He nodded to the bartender and said, "I just won the price of a drink off Sam."

While the bartender filled a glass in front of him, he asked Porter, "Dick come in with you?"

Porter nodded back toward the stud game. "We'll be leav-

ing as soon as he loses the rest of his cash. Won't be long, I reckon. He was down four hundred half an hour ago." There was a covert sneer in his voice as he spoke of his employer's son. He lifted his glass and said perfunctorily, "Here's to you, Sheriff."

Pat nodded and drained his glass. He said, "Isn't four hundred pretty heavy losing for a kid like Dick?"

Porter laughed shortly. "I reckon Bill keeps on hopin' he'll learn when not to call."

"Did you know Bill Freeman down in Texas?"

"Nope. I hired on with him ten years ago, a green hand."

"I've never quite been able to figure Bill having a kid like Dick," Pat said casually. "He sure don't act like he's got much Freeman blood in him."

"There's a reason for that," Porter said shortly.

"So?" Pat looked interested.

"Shore. Dick ain't a Freeman. Not many people know it, but Bill took him in and 'dopted him about eight years ago. Brought him back from Denver where he got him out of some orphans' home. It's dang near broke Bill's heart the way the boy's turned out."

"Is that a fact? I never knew that before. Always wondered what'd become of Bill's wife."

"He never had one, I reckon. Never heard him mention being married."

Pat nodded. He said, "I'm going to have to pull Dick away from that game. Got a couple of people up to the hotel want to see him."

Clay Porter's sleepy black eyes opened a trifle and showed a gleam of curiosity. "Anything wrong?"

Pat shook his head. "Just some old friends of Bill Freeman's in town." He sauntered away from the bar toward the poker game.

There were four players. Dick Freeman was the youngest by several years. He was a big-boned youth, with dark features that held a naturally sullen expression. He needed a haircut, and one thick strand of coarse black hair fell dankly across his forehead as he cursed loudly and threw his hand

down. He glared up at Pat as the sheriff stopped beside his chair, and muttered hoarsely, "They're trimmin' me, Sheriff. If we didn't have a new deck I'd swear they were marked cards."

He had a big mouth and loose lips. He hadn't begun to shave yet, and his cheeks and chin were covered with soft down. He looked down at the few remaining chips in front of him and asked the other players, "Any of you wanta stake me to another hundred?"

All of them avoided his eyes, and none replied. Pat put his hand on the lad's shoulder and said drily, "Cash in those few you've got left, Dick, an' come along with me."

Dick looked up with his mouth hanging open slackly. "I ain't done nothin', Sheriff."

Pat grinned and said easily, "I'm not arresting you, Dick. Just want you to meet some friends up at the hotel."

"It ain't yore job tuh nursemaid me," the boy said defensively. "I can pay for another stack of chips when I come to town next week."

Pat's fingers tightened on his shoulder, and without perceptible effort the sheriff lifted him from his chair. He kept his voice low and even, but it held the ring of authority, "I said to cash in and come on with me."

Behind him, Clay Porter's smooth voice asked, "Any trouble here?"

Without looking at him, Pat said, "No trouble, Clay."

The boy wrenched his shoulder away from Pat's hand resentfully, and leaned down to push his chips into the center of the table. The house-man counted them and laid out a few greenbacks. Dick Freeman seized them and turned to the sheriff angrily. "What's this hocus-pocus all about? It's my money I'm losing."

"That's right, Sheriff." Porter's voice was still smooth, but it was edged and cold. "Looks tuh me like yo're hornin' in where you ain't needed. I'm responsible for Dick when he's in town."

Pat snorted angrily and took Dick's arm in a firm grip. "You're welcome to trail along," he told the Four-V's fore-

man, "but you're both gettin' wringy about nothing. Some folks at the hotel want to talk with Dick like I said." He turned and led the boy out to the swinging doors while Porter followed with an indecisive scowl on his face.

Outside the Gold Eagle, Pat let go of Dick's arm and said impatiently, "I'm not worrying about how you throw away yore money, son. These people are from the East and I promised to bring you up to the hotel."

"From the East?" The boy's voice broke into an adolescent squeak. He stopped for a moment and stared at Pat. "I don't know nobody from the East."

"These are old friends of Bill's," Pat told him. "You knew he'd lived in the East before he adopted you, didn't you?"

There was a queer look of fright on Dick's loose-lipped face. He turned to Porter who had followed them out of the saloon and demanded, "Did you hear that, Clay? What's he talkin' about?"

"I shore dunno," Clay Porter said. "Whyn't we all go up to the hotel an' see?"

"That makes sense," Pat growled. He turned and stalked ahead of them toward the Jewel Hotel.

He found the trio waiting in the lobby when he turned in ahead of the pair. Joan Wilcox jumped up with impulsive eagerness and asked, "Where is he, Sheriff? Did you ask him . . . about being adopted?"

Pat nodded. "That part's all right." He turned as the door opened behind him and said gruffly, "This here is Dick Freeman, Miss Wilcox. And Clay Porter, foreman of the Four-V's."

Dick stopped and gaped at the beautiful young girl. Porter stopped beside him but he didn't gape. His eyes widened and became boldly admiring. He lifted his hat with a flourish and said, "I shore am pleased to meet up with you, Miss Wilcox." His gaze lingered downward over her trim figure and came back to her face.

"And Mr. Munson," Pat went on. "Miss Wilcox's fiancy from Philadelphia. They came all the way to Dutch Springs lookin' for Bill Freeman."

Paul Munson moved forward to stand beside Joan. He said shortly, "What's this nonsense about you pretending to be Freeman's son?" eying Dick accusingly.

Dick colored and dropped his eyes and shuffled his boot-clad feet. "I dunno what you mean."

"You must know his name is really Wilcox," Munson said flatly. "This young lady is his daughter. His *only* child."

Porter straightened and his black eyes narrowed. "What're you drivin' at, Mister?"

"I've stated it as plainly as I am able," snapped Munson. "We know your employer's name isn't Freeman and this young man is illegally masquerading as his son."

Dick's loose lips trembled and he was about to speak when Porter thrust him back and said curtly, "I dunno what yore game is, but I ain't takin' much of that kinda talk from no city dude." His hand dropped to the butt of his holstered gun and his voice rang out ominously, "Anybody that's got anything tuh say against Bill Freeman is talkin' tuh me fust. What d'yuh mean by sayin' his name ain't Freeman?"

Munson shrugged and tightened his lips. Before he could jerk out an angry reply, Joan pressed forward and said impulsively, "Don't you understand? We think Mr. Freeman is really my father who disappeared from Philadelphia more than ten years ago. That's all. We're not accusing him of doing anything wrong." Her voice trembled and she choked back a sob. "Haven't you ever heard him mention Philadelphia or having a wife and daughter back there?"

Clay Porter stared at her grimly. "Sounds like a passel of lies tuh me, Ma'm. Bill Freeman's from Texas an' I've heard him say plenty of times he ain't never been East of the Mississippi in his hull life."

There was an instant of silence in the hotel lobby. Then Joan said, "Take me to him, Mr. Porter. As soon as I see him, I'll know. Please take me to him."

Porter shook his head doggedly. He turned to Pat and appealed to him, "It's time you stopped this foolishment, Sheriff. Pears tuh me there's a bad mistake somewheres. What proof has she got of these things she's sayin'?"

"She hasn't any positive proof," Pat admitted. "She knows her father is in Powder Valley living under a different name, and several things make us think he may be Bill Freeman. As soon as Winters gets back from Pueblo we'll know," he went on. "Her father wrote East years ago to say she and her mother could get in touch with him through Winters."

"Then let her wait till he gets here an' tells her who she's lookin' for," growled Porter ungraciously. "Bill Freeman is a sick man an' ain't in no shape tuh have somethin' like that throwed at him unexpected. C'mon, Dick. We'll be ridin' back to thuh ranch."

He turned on his heel and strode out, and after a moment of indecision, Dick followed him. Joan started forward with a little cry of dismay, but Pat caught her arm and advised her, "I wouldn't argue with 'em, Miss. Wait'll you can see Mr. Winters an' find out for sure."

"What made them act like that?" she cried out with tears in her eyes. "As though I . . . as though I were making it all up. I don't think they believed me at all."

"I don't rightly know," Pat said slowly. "I reckon it was sort of a shock to hear you say Bill Freeman is somebody else. I'll ride out to the Four-V's tomorrow an' have a talk with Bill myself," he soothed the distraught girl.

With that promise, she and her fiancé had to be content, but after they had left the couple at the hotel and were strolling down the street toward their horses, Pat admitted to Sam with a shake of his head, "I don't like the looks of this very much. Seemed like Clay Porter took it personal about that girl claimin' to be Bill's daughter."

"He changed toward her mighty fast," Sam agreed. "Fust off, I thought he was gonna start makin' love to her right there in the hotel. But he cooled off fast after Munson spoke his piece."

"Too fast and too much," Pat growled. "A man'd think he'd like the idea of havin' a purty girl like that come out to the ranch to stay." They reached the hitching rail where their horses were tied, and mounted to ride back to the Lazy

Mare ranch where Sam and his wife and young son were staying until they got a place of their own.

"We'll ride out to see Bill first thing in the morning," Pat proposed as they turned out of town. "I'm right curious to know how the old lobo cottons to the idea of being daddy to the purtiest girl I ever saw."

3.

LEAVING THE HOTEL behind them, Clay Porter and Dick stalked side by side toward the Gold Eagle hitchrack. Dick's face held a queer look of indecision and he glanced aside at his companion a couple of times as though to speak, but the harshly forbidding expression on Porter's face deterred him.

They reached the front of the saloon in silence, and as Dick started to turn in with him, the foreman stopped and held him back. "We better be ridin', kid. I'll just be a minute inside. You wait here by the hawses."

"I'd shore like a drink," the youth said resentfully.

"They won't sell you a drink an' you know it," Porter reminded him sharply. "You wait out here." He pushed through the swinging doors into the saloon while Dick loitered indecisively outside.

With a mumbled oath at his youth which kept him away from such adult pleasures, Dick turned to the hitchrack and untied the reins of a big-boned roan carrying the Four-V's brand on his hip. The roan tossed his head and backed away, and Dick swung into the saddle as the swinging doors opened again and Clay Porter came out.

Dick's eyes glinted avidly as he saw the paper-wrapped bottle in the foreman's hand. He reined his horse back and waited impatiently for Porter to mount, then spurred to a gallop down Main Street and out of Dutch Springs toward the ranch at the upper end of the Valley.

The night was young, and the darkness was soft and illu-

sive about them as they left the town behind. They rode side by side at a gallop for half a mile before Dick reined up and begged greedily, "C'mon, Clay. Gimme a drink out of that bottle before I plumb die of wantin' one."

"I figured you'd be needing a drink," Porter said grimly. He pulled his mount down and reached behind him into the saddlebag for the whiskey bottle he had bought at the Gold Eagle. He had had the cork loosened by the bartender, and now he pulled it out and offered the open bottle to the seventeen-year-old boy.

Dick seized it and took three big gulps of the whiskey. It set him to coughing violently as it burned its way down his throat, but he gulped and said manfully, "That's mighty good rot-gut, Clay. Shore sets a man right." He took a smaller drink and passed the bottle back to the Four-V's foreman.

Porter recorked it and slid the bottle back into his saddlebag. They started forward at a jog-trot and Porter said, "The way you got sick-lookin' back at the hotel, I knew you needed a bracer."

"What are we gonna do?" demanded the boy miserably. "She'll take the ranch sure. You know as well as I do that she was tellin' the truth. I don't see what good it did to deny it like you did. I told you all about how Dad's name is really Wilcox an' he's got a girl about her age that he ain't seen for ten years."

"I know you did. But she ain't proved she's the one yet."

"She will. As soon as she sees Dad. Or as soon as Winters gets back from Pueblo."

"Bill's a mighty sick man right now," Porter said significantly. "Supposin' he wasn't to live long enough for her to get out to see him?"

"Not much chance of that," Dick argued. "He ain't really sick. Just down in the back, sorta, so he don't feel like ridin'."

"Lots of things can happen in a couple of days. You need another drink." Porter got the bottle out and passed it over. "Buck up and let's start some figuring. You'll not only lose

the ranch but you'll more'n likely go to jail too if she proves she's got a right to it."

Dick choked over his drink. "Jail? How come?"

"Bill ain't due to live very long any way you look at it," Porter explained. "When he dies an' that girl inherits the ranch instead of you, there'll be a strict legal accounting. We've been rustlin' cattle out from under the old man's nose for months, thinkin' we wouldn't get caught because the ranch'd be yours after he died anyhow, and it was just sort of stealing from yourself. But her coming makes everything different."

"You're in it with me," exclaimed Dick excitedly. "You're jest as guilty as me."

"Which is what I'm thinkin' about," said Porter grimly. "I don't hanker to give up a good thing, an' I sure ain't got no yearnin' for jail. That's why I stalled 'em at the hotel."

Dick put the bottle to his mouth again. When he took it down, he hiccoughed and said, "You didn't do any more'n put it off for a day or so."

"Unless maybe Bill Freeman was to kick the bucket before she gets to him."

"There's still Mr. Winters," Dick reminded him. "He knows Dad's name is Wilcox like she claims."

"Sure he does. But that doesn't prove *she's* his daughter. Lots of gals around the country named Wilcox that can't show no legal right to inherit the Four-V's. Looks to me like she might have a hard time provin' it if Bill Freeman was to die before she gets to him."

"She most likely has got letters and things."

"You told me yourself that Bill hadn't wrote back East but once since he came here. And he didn't get no answer to that letter."

"One letter would be enough," muttered Dick dispiritedly. He took another pull at the whiskey bottle and slumped down in the saddle.

"All right then," said Porter angrily. "Maybe she can prove she's the daughter of a rancher whose real name is Wilcox, living in Powder Valley under another name. Except for

Winters an' us, there ain't another living soul can prove Bill Freeman is him."

"But Mr. Winters knows. When Dad told me about it a few years back, he said Winters knew all about it."

"Winters ain't the type to've ever told anybody else."

"What of it? *He* knows. An' he'll be back in Dutch Springs in a couple of days."

"Somethin' might happen to him too," Porter suggested curtly.

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean we're in a bad spot less'n we do somethin' right quick. The Four-V's records show over two thousand head of cattle on our range, and you an' me know there ain't but a little more'n half that many if they're ever counted."

"We shouldn't ever have done it," Dick cried out despondently. "I didn't want to help you."

"The hell you didn't. You wanted money to gamble with."

"But I didn't think it was really wrong. I figured they'd all belong to me some day anyhow, an' I didn't see why I couldn't start sellin' some off now." Dick tilted the bottle and took another drink. His tongue was beginning to feel thick, and his voice sounded fuzzy.

"Go ahead an' get plastered," Porter said shortly. "You ain't got the guts of a chipmunk without a few drinks in yore belly."

Dick put the bottle up to his mouth again. The liquor didn't burn as it went down now, and it didn't make him cough. He straightened his shoulders and began to feel bluster and grown-up. "That was a mighty purty gal back to the hotel," he said thoughtfully. "Wouldn't be so bad havin' her around the ranch, huh?"

"Except you wouldn't be there to see her," Porter taunted him. "If she gets next to Bill Freeman, you'll end up in jail."

"That's not right," Dick protested thickly. "I didn't mean to do nothin' wrong."

"Be mighty handy for us if Bill Freeman was to die tonight," said Porter callously.

"But he ain't that sick." Dick was beginning to sway a

little in the saddle. He caught hold of the horn with his left hand while the fingers of his right hand lovingly gripped the neck of the whiskey bottle.

"Nobody but us knows how sick he is," Clay Porter reminded him. "Remember, I tol' 'em in town he was pretty bad off. I reckon nobody won't be too much surprised if he was to kick off tonight."

"Are you figuring on . . . do you mean you're gonna *do* somethin' to him tonight?" Despite the liquor, the boy was horrified at the thought.

"Would you rather spend the rest of your life in jail for stealin' cows?" Porter asked bluntly.

The shock of the question sobered the boy a trifle. He shakily lifted the bottle for another swig of false courage. "I don't care if something does happen to him," he announced angrily. "He's always tellin' me what to do like I was still a kid in knee-pants. Never givin' me no money of my own."

"Shore," drawled Porter, "he's been holdin' his money back hoping that gal would come out here so he could give it to her, I reckon. What's she done to deserve it? You've worked like a dog on the ranch all these years."

"I sure have. I'd of run away long ago 'cept I thought I'd get the ranch when he died."

"You still can get the ranch," Porter assured him craftily, "if Bill Freeman dies tonight."

"There's still Mr. Winters to tell what he knows."

"You leave Winters to me. Lots of things can happen to a man on a trip back from Pueblo."

"You mean . . . you'll kill him too?"

"Why not? We got to, ain't we? We're both in this too deep to back out now."

Dick took another drink. The bottle was almost half empty now. He held it up to the light of the moon and was impressed by the amount he had drunk. Almost a pint, by golly, and he'd never had more than three drinks in a row in his life before. And he wasn't drunk either. He'd never felt clearer-headed in his life. He could see now that Clay was right. Even if that girl was Bill Freeman's daughter, she

didn't have any business coming here now and claiming the ranch right out from under his nose. For years, he had regarded it as his actual rightful inheritance. Years ago, when Bill Freeman took the boy into his confidence, he had explained that he never expected to hear from his wife or daughter again, and that if he didn't the ranch would legally descend to his adopted son according to the state laws.

Bill Freeman was an old man, without many more years to live. Since his fall from the horse, his back pained him a lot, and he hardly got out of the house at all. It wasn't like he enjoyed life. The law let a man shoot a horse after he broke his leg, didn't it? What was so different about helping a sick old man out of his misery?

Dick took another drink and began to feel quite light-headed and gay. Clay Porter was a mighty fine partner. He wouldn't let a fellow down. He didn't care how much money a fellow gambled, and he'd even buy a bottle sometimes. If Bill Freeman was out of the way, the future would be mighty fine.

Dick swayed dangerously in the saddle as he turned to look at Clay. "Yo're right," he said thickly. "Thass the thing tuh do, right enough. If the ol' coot dies tuhnight, you an' me can run thuh ranch the way we wanta."

"Now you're talkin' like a growed-up man," Porter told him. "We're gettin' close to thuh ranch," he went on evenly. "Better not hit that bottle no more till you get there."

"I can take it," Dick boasted. "Seems like likker don't hardly bother me none a-tall. I've done already drunk more'n half of it."

"Save the rest till after you get to the ranch," Porter advised him. "The old man'll be in bed when we get there. No need for him to wake up at all."

"I gotcha," Dick assured him. "That way it won't hurt none." He giggled drunkenly. "He won't never know it's happened."

"That's right. The ranch house is right around the bend yonder. You ain't too drunk, are you?"

"Me, I ain't hardly drunk a-tall. Won't hurt him, huh, while he's layin' in bed asleep?"

"Won't hurt a bit," Porter assured him heartily. Their horses rounded the bend and the buildings of the Four-V's ranch were spread out before them in the moonlight. There were no lights in any of the buildings because Bill Freeman was the only one there and since his illness he had been going to bed very early. It was lucky, Clay Porter reflected, that there weren't any other ranch hands on the Four-V's right now. It was the slack season of the year, and Porter had paid off the two regular hands a couple of months earlier so as to have a free hand in the rustling operations he and Dick had been jointly engaged in. Later, he had planned to hire new hands who wouldn't be aware that the herds had been depleted.

They rode briskly up to the ranch house, and Dick dismounted, lurching drunkenly as his feet touched solid ground.

Clay Porter leaned forward and caught the reins of Dick's horse, said swiftly in a low tone, "You go ahead on in. I'll take yore hawse down to the corral an' unsaddle him. You know what's got to be done?"

"Shore, I know." The boy stumbled away toward the front door, clutching the half-empty whiskey bottle tightly.

Porter waited there until the door closed behind the whiskey-dazed youth, then turned and rode down to the corral leading Dick's horse by the bridle reins.

4.

PAT STEVENS and Sam Sloan got away from the Lazy Mare ranch early the next morning. Both men were exceedingly interested in the claims made by Joan Wilcox the preceding evening, and were eager to put it right up to Bill Freeman and see what his reaction would be. They were prompted by sheer curiosity more than anything else, though neither of them admitted it.

In truth, they had both been more than a little bored with life until the girl and her fiancé arrived from the East and tossed this minor problem in their laps. Strictly speaking, it wasn't any of their business whether Bill Freeman was actually named Wilcox or not. Under ordinary circumstances, they would have sat back and waited for Mr. Winters to return from Pueblo and tell the girl who her father was.

But these weren't ordinary circumstances. For months, things had been going along with disconcerting smoothness in Powder Valley. With a hard-working, efficient foreman and a good crew of hands on the Lazy Mare, there was nothing to keep Pat busy on his ranch; and Sam Sloan was merely marking time until they obtained legal title to an adjoining piece of property which he planned to move onto with his wife and baby son. In the meantime, he and his family were visiting at the Lazy Mare, and months of continued inaction had begun to gall both men.

They weren't used to inaction. For years past they, with big, one-eyed Ezra, had formed a hard-riding, fast-shooting

trio with a reputation for taking the law into their own hands whenever the opportunity presented itself—and there had been no lack of opportunity in that section of the lawless West during the many years while they were converting Powder Valley from a terror-ridden hangout of owl-hooters to its present civilized status.

Now, they found the job too well done for their own peace of mind. Increasingly in the past few years, they'd been forced to ride far from the Valley in search of excitement; and this small mystery precipitated by the arrival of Joan Wilcox was a pretext eagerly seized by them for sticking their noses into an affair that was really none of their business.

Knowing and liking Bill Freeman as they did, and heartily disliking the adopted son whom they had expected to inherit the Four-V's ranch on Bill's death—they had been greatly pleased by this new development and they were both frankly hopeful that the Eastern girl would succeed in proving her legal claim to the ranch.

Too, they had been puzzled by Clay Porter's rather queer attitude toward the entire matter last night. In the first place, Clay had shown a remarkable lack of surprise at the suggestion that his employer's name might be Wilcox instead of Freeman—as though maybe it wasn't news to him at all. At the same time, there was his definite denial that Bill Freeman could possibly be the girl's father, and his ill-humored refusal to allow her to go to the ranch to see for herself.

His statement that Bill was too sick to have visitors sounded fishy to the sheriff and his friend. If Bill was all that sick, they thought they would have heard about it before.

"But I still don't see why Clay Porter acted thataway," Sam Sloan argued with Pat as they rode together through the crisp air of early morning. "Like, by golly, 'twas *his* ranch the girl was after. Clay ain't got no claim on the ol' man, has he?"

"Not that I know of. Except he might be feared he'd lose his job as foreman if the girl was to move in."

"That don't make sense," Sam scoffed. "Clay's a good man an' he could get another job easy."

"He's a good friend of Dick's," Pat went on thoughtfully. "Might be it made him mad to think maybe Dick was going to get beat out of the ranch."

"That Dick ain't worth a damn," said Sam angrily. "Hangin' around town gamblin' an' drinkin' 'fore he's even half growed up. He never did no real work around that ranch when Ezra an' me lived close by."

"We'll find out about it soon enough," Pat told him cheerfully. "Mighty good to be out straddling a hawse before sunup with some place to go. We both been gettin' too much fat on our backsides sitting around playing casino." He drew in a deep breath of the cool morning air, rising in his stirrups to look searchingly across the wide and peaceful expanse of the Valley spreading out in front and to both sides as far as the eye could see.

They were riding at an angle across the floor of the Valley, following a general northwesterly direction that by-passed the town of Dutch Springs on their right and would carry them up the opposite slope directly to the headquarters of the Four-V's ranch.

Sam settled back to silence in his own saddle, looking with satisfaction at the herds of fat cattle grazing along the way and conjuring up mental pictures of the herds that would soon be wearing his own brand on the Hazeltine ranch that lay just south of the Lazy Mare.

They continued in silence at a mile-devouring jog-trot, each engrossed with his own thoughts and in the simple pleasure of riding the range together again—and in having some definite place to go.

It was more than an hour later, and the sun was well above the horizon behind them when Pat nodded toward a low group of buildings in the distance and said, "Is that the Four-V's layout yonder?"

"That's it," Sam assented. "The old place looks sorta run to seed, don't it?"

"Not like Bill used to keep it up," Pat muttered. "I reckon that's on account of him not hirin' no more help. Seems to

me like I heard in town last week that Clay Porter and Dick are doin' all the work without any other help."

"It's a big spread for two of 'em to handle. I never knowed Bill to pinch pennies on hirin' help before. When Ezra an' me lived up the Valley, he allus had three or four hands besides the foreman."

"Looks plumb deserted this mawnin'," Pat muttered as they drew nearer. "Wonder what that cow's bawling for?"

"I bin wonderin' that too," Sam muttered anxiously, listening to loud and continuous mooing of a cow in one of the dilapidated sheds below the ranch house. "No smoke comin' from the chimney," he noted, "an' only a couple of hawses in the corral."

"Clay and Dick must be saddled and out already. Bill's most probably up to the house by himself. Let's ride by the sheds and see has a cow got her leg hung up in the wire or something."

They swung their horses down toward the mournful lowing of the cow, and as they got closer they heard the frantic bawling of a calf added to the louder sound.

"Lookit him there," Sam exclaimed. "A little ol' white-face penned up outside tryin' to break down the fence an' get in to his mama. The way she sounds, I'll betcha they rode off this mawnin' without milkin' her or even turning the calf in to suck."

"Sounds like it," Pat agreed grimly, for they were close to the shed now and the lowing of the unseen cow had a note of agony in it. Just outside the shed, the small calf was in a wire enclosure, braced on four wobbly outspread legs with its nose pressed against the wood siding of the shed while it rolled its eyes and frantically answered its mother's voice.

Pat swung off his horse and threw back the bar locking the doors of the shed. He had to step aside quickly to avoid the rush of a muley cow out the doors as they opened. She disregarded him completely, trotting to her fenced-in calf and thrusting her head through between the wires to lick its face. Her udder was distended and full of milk, the four teats

extended stiffly, and milk began to drip from them as she licked her hungry calf.

"Ain't been milked for at least twenty-four hours," said Pat angrily. "What kind of a layout are they running here?" He stepped over the low fence and picked the calf up bodily, lifted him over the barbed wires and set him on the ground beside his mother where he instantly seized one of the swollen teats in his mouth and began sucking gustily.

Her bellowing ceased at once and she turned her head to look at Pat with great, mournful eyes as though thanking him for what he'd done.

Pat turned away disgustedly, seized his horse's reins and led him up the slope toward the house, telling Sam hotly over his shoulder, "Looks like Bill's foreman ain't doin' such a good job while Bill's laid up. A man that'd neglect a fresh cow that way ought to have his ears cut off."

"I don't savvy it," Sam said, riding along beside him. "Clay was always a mighty good cow-man. If they did get home from town too late to milk her last night, I cain't see why him an' Dick would both ride off this mawnin' without even turning the calf in to suck."

Pat dropped his reins as they neared the front door of the house, and Sam swung out of the saddle and ground-tied his own mount and joined him. Pat mounted the wooden porch and knocked perfunctorily on the closed door, then pushed it open and called loudly, "Bill! Bill Freeman! Where are you?"

No answer at all came from the interior of the house. His own voice was eerily echoed back at him and then there was silence.

Pat shrugged his shoulders and pushed the door wide open. He entered a littered and unswept living room with Sam right behind him, and paused a moment to mutter, "This is damned funny. Maybe Bill ain't so sick he couldn't ride out with the boys today."

"An' maybe he's had a bad attack an' is layin' in bed and can't answer us," Sam snapped out. "Right through here used to be Bill's bedroom."

He led the way through the living room and along a narrow hall to a closed doorway at the back and on the left. He opened the door of a large bedroom, filled with bright sunlight from the double windows on the east.

Standing in the hall behind him, Pat saw Sam's squat body stiffen, and then he stepped toward the bed saying hoarsely, "Bill! Wake up. What in tunket . . . ?"

His voice dropped suddenly as he leaned over and put his hand on the shoulder of the old man lying doubled up in bed in a contorted position beneath a single thin coverlet.

Sam straightened slowly and drew his hand away, turning to Pat and muttering in an awestricken voice: "He's dead, Pat. Plumb cold an' stiff. Bill Freeman is dead!"

Pat stood beside him looking down at the old man's body. He leaned forward and gently pulled aside the coverlet to disclose his gaunt face. The features were twisted in an indescribable expression of pain and horror; the tongue was thickened and it protruded from bluish lips, his eyes bulged in their deep sockets as though they vainly sought to burst from the confinement of tightly closed lids.

Pat looked down at him steadily, and then touched his fingers to the cold flesh. He pulled the coverlet down again and said harshly, "He's been dead twelve hours or more. Do you reckon Clay an' Dick didn't even come back to the ranch last night?"

"Bartender at the Gold Eagle said they left town right after we saw 'em at the hotel. Sold Clay a quart of whiskey for him to bring out to Bill."

"Looks like they didn't get here," Pat muttered. He went to the windows and pulled down the shades for it seemed more fitting for a death-room to be in semi-darkness, and then he went out into the hallway and with a queer expression on his face, headed toward the kitchen.

Sam followed him silently. In the kitchen they found a few dirty dishes stacked up on the kitchen table while the rest of the room was in perfect order.

"Stove's plumb cold," Pat reported. "Hasn't anybody cooked any breakfast here this morning."

"One dirty plate an' set of eatin' tools here on the table," Sam said. "Left over from supper last night, I reckon. An' there's two dirty cawfee cups, Pat."

"That one plate'd be left from Bill's supper, I reckon. Looks like Clay an' Dick must of ate in town before they came back," Pat muttered. "Maybe they both drank some coffee afterward. But where in hell are they? Do you reckon they'd both go ridin' off leaving Bill dead in bed? And not fix any breakfast?"

"It don't seem fittin'," Sam agreed. "Most generally a feller feels like somebody should stay with a corpse. How long would you say Bill'd bin dead, Pat?"

"I'm not a doctor, but at least twelve hours. Maybe a lot longer. It's a gut cinch he didn't die and get that stiff and cold since they got up and rode off this morning."

"If they'd found him like that last night when they got back, one of 'em would sure have rode to town with the news an' there'd be someone here," Sam argued. "Looks tuh me like there's somethin' mighty funny about this."

"He didn't die easy," Pat spoke quietly but his voice was taut and hard. "He fought it plenty. You can see that from the way he's twisted up and the look on his face."

"Yeh. It's a damn shame too. Jest when his gal come out from the city to make up to him after all these years."

They slowly moved out of the kitchen. There was a roll-top desk at the far end of the living room beside the stone fireplace. The top was rolled back and there was a litter of papers on the desk. Pat went toward it, muttering, "That don't look like the way Bill would leave his desk. He always seemed mighty neat and orderly to me."

"He was," Sam assented quickly. "Two or three times I've seen him open that desk up all the papers was allus put away careful in them little boxes at the back."

Pat stood over the desk looking down at it carefully. Most of the pigeonholes were empty. Some of them contained papers that had obviously been carelessly crammed back. He pointed out a fresh scar made on the oak surface in

front beside the lock, and showed Sam a corresponding mark on the bottom edge of the roll-top.

"Looks like the desk was locked and somebody pried it open," he told Sam. "Then they went through all his papers looking for something."

Standing close beside him, Sam Sloan stiffened. He turned his head in a strained position to look over his shoulder at the door leading into the hallway, and his hand dropped to the butt of his gun. "Did you hear that?" he whispered tensely.

"What?"

"I dunno." Sam kept his voice low. He was breathing hard. "Sounded like bedsprings squeakin'. *Like somebody gettin' up or turnin' over in bed.*"

Pat said, "There's nobody back there but a corpse."

"That's what I was thinkin'." Sam pulled out a bandana and mopped sweat from his face with a trembling hand. "Spirits maybe. Old Bill's ghost!"

Pat said, "I didn't hear anything. Rats, I reckon." He turned his attention back to the desk, began meditatively pawing through the papers cluttering it. "I wonder what anybody . . ."

Sam shuddered and grabbed his arm violently. "I never knowed a rat that put on his boots. D'yuh hear that?"

Pat frowned. He had heard something. And it *had* sounded like a man stamping his foot into a too-tight boot. He said impatiently, "Must be a pack-rat has drug in a stick of wood to leave in place of something he's stole. You know good an' well . . ."

"I know good an' well somebody or *something* is moving back yonder." Sam's dark face had turned ashen and he had his .45 in his hand. "If it's a rat, he's big as a man."

Pat heard the unmistakable creak of bedsprings now. It certainly wasn't caused by any rat. But ghosts were supposed to be formless and weightless, so he didn't see how a spirit could make bedsprings creak like that.

He muttered, "I *know* Bill was dead. I felt of him, dang it."

He began to move quietly toward the door leading out of the living room, and without quite realizing what he was doing, he drew his gun also.

Sam Sloan tiptoed along beside him. Pat grinned for one fleeting instant, realizing how funny they would look if anybody could see them: two grown men stalking a ghostly sound with drawn guns in a house inhabited only by a corpse.

But he stopped grinning as they reached the doorway and were able to look down the hall. The door on the opposite side of the hall from Bill Freeman's bedroom was opening.

There wasn't any doubt about it. The knob was turning and now the door was being drawn inward by an invisible force, slowly and with maddening deliberation.

He and Sam stood stockstill and fascinatedly watched the door open inward. Their guns were cocked and they both covered the doorway.

Then a figure lurched out into the hall and confronted them. It was Dick Freeman.

His coarse black hair was uncombed and hung down over his bloodshot eyes. His clothing was rumpled and disarranged from having been slept in all night, and his big mouth hung open slackly.

He staggered against the wall and stared at the two grim-faced men and the muzzles of their guns, and croaked weakly, "What tuh hell's matter? Whatcha doin' here an' lookin' at me like that?"

Pat holstered his gun and stepped forward. Five feet from the swaying youth, he caught the rank odor of stale whiskey mingled with the foul breath from an upset stomach. He demanded harshly, "What're you doing here, Dick?"

"Jush . . . just woke up," the boy mumbled. "Whassa matter? Who's bin breakin' rotten eggs in my mouth?" He shuddered and retched violently. "Gotta get a drink. M'burnin' up." He staggered past Pat down the hallway, holding himself erect with one hand against the wall.

Pat stepped to the open door of the bedroom and looked in. The windows were tightly closed and the atmosphere

was fetid and nauseating. An empty quart whiskey bottle lay on the floor beside the bed. Sometime during the night, the boy had vomited on the covers.

He turned and went slowly back to Sam who stood just inside the living room. Dick had made his way into the kitchen, and they could hear the hand-pump wheezing as he primed it to get a fresh flow of cold water started.

Sam shook his head and said, "He looks like a mighty sick boy."

"He's due to be a lot sicker," Pat said angrily, "before I finish with him." He strode forward purposefully toward the kitchen.

5.

IN THE KITCHEN, water was gushing from the iron spout of the pump into a tin basin. When the basin was half full, Dick stopped pumping and bent over, spraddle-legged, to douse his head and face in the water. He came up puffing and blowing, reached out blindly for a dirty towel hanging on a nail beside the back door.

After partially drying his face and hair, he pumped a dipperful of the cold well water and drank it in thirsty gulps.

From the doorway, Pat Stevens and Sam Sloan watched in stony silence until he was through. His eyes were still bloodshot and his face was a sickish gray color when he turned toward them, but he looked a lot better than when he first arose.

He essayed an attitude of grinning bravado and he tried to swagger as he turned toward the two men, but it didn't quite come off. Beneath the outward semblance of manhood he was still a sick and frightened boy.

"I sure got me a hell of a hangover this morning," he announced unsteadily. "What time is it? What's . . . happened?"

"What d'yuh mean—what's happened?" snapped Pat.

"Where is everybody? Dad and Clay? What're you doing here so early? An' how come you both had your guns throwed down on me when I came out of my room?"

Pat said, "Don't you know where Bill and Clay are?"

"No. I don't know nothin'." Dick groaned dismally and

pressed his hands to his forehead. "My head feels like it's full of blacksmiths pounding on the inside with sledgehammers."

He came across the kitchen toward them, swaying weakly and holding his head.

They stepped aside and Pat took his arm to lead him to a chair in the living room and thrust him down into it ungently. Standing over the wretched boy, he growled, "What time'd you get home las' night?"

"I dunno." Dick shook his head dismally. "Couldn't of been so very late. Clay an' me left town right we saw you-all at the hotel."

"Come straight home?"

"Yeh."

"What did you do when you got here? Was Bill up when you got home?"

"I dunno. I don't remember it very good," the boy whined. "Things are all sorta mixed up. Whatsamatter anyhow?"

"You'll find out about that soon enough," Pat told him evenly. "Right now I'm askin' about last night. You and Clay were drinking, huh?"

"I was." The boy shuddered and licked his dry lips. "I don't rightly recollect whether Clay drank any out of the bottle or not. Mostly not, I reckon. I done it all myself. Gee Whillikers," he went on with a note of youthful awe creeping into his voice. "I reckon I drank most a whole quart of whiskey. No wonder I don't remember much."

"What'd you do when you got home?"

"Come in an' went to bed," Dick muttered. "Leastwise, I don't recollect nothin' else. Seems like Clay unsaddled my hawse for me, an' I come on in."

"Did you talk to Bill any?"

"Not that I know of. It's all mixed up," the boy confessed weakly. "I guess I sorta passed out when I got off my hawse. I know I'd drunk more'n a pint just ridin' back from town," he added proudly.

"Where's Clay this morning?" Pat persisted.

"I dunno. I just woke up. You oughtta know that. You were here when I got up."

"Where does Clay sleep?"

"In a cot on the back porch. Since we let the other hands go. We closed up the bunkhouse an' he's been staying here."

Pat turned to Sam and growled, "Go take a look."

Sam went out toward the back porch and Pat continued his probing, "Doesn't Clay eat here too?"

"Sure he does. He does mosta the cookin'."

"Eats a hearty breakfast, huh?"

"Flapjacks most generally. With fried sowbelly an' coffee. What're you askin' all these here questions for?" demanded Dick, his voice rising shakily. "What's wrong? Where is Dad an' Clay? What're you and Sam acting so funny about?"

Sam Sloan came back into the room with a scowl on his dark face. He shook his head and reported, "Looks like the cot ain't been slept in last night."

Pat nodded as though he wasn't at all surprised by this news. "You better ride to Dutch Springs, Sam. Lay the leather to your cayuse an' bring Doc Trimble back with you in a hurry. And if you see anybody along the way," he added significantly, "pass the word out that Clay Porter is wanted here bad. If he don't wanta come, anybody that sees him is deputized to bring him in."

Sam said grimly, "I getcha." He strode to the outer door, paused to ask over his shoulder, "You want I should keep this quiet in town? Or d'yuh want I should maybe say somethin' about it to a certain party at thuh Jewel Hotel?"

"Don't say nothing about it," Pat ordered. "She'll be findin' out soon enough."

Sam Sloan went out and slammed the door shut behind him. A moment later the pounding hoofbeats of his horse receded at a gallop down the road toward Dutch Springs.

As the hoofbeats of Sam's horse faded away in the distance, Dick Freeman lifted his head and stared up at Pat with puzzled and frightened eyes. "Why're you sending for Doctor Trimble? What . . . has happened?"

"Don't give me that stuff," said Pat roughly. "I figure you know as well as I do."

"But I don't," the boy cried out. "I've told you I drank that whole bottle of whiskey and passed out."

"I don't believe you were that drunk," Pat told him grimly.

"How drunk? What do you mean? Has somethin' happened to Clay? Where is he?"

"Something's happened, but not to Clay."

"To Dad then? Is that it?" Dick pulled himself up from his chair.

"Where do you think he is?" Pat asked caustically. "You an' Clay were mighty bent on tellin' how sick he was last night. Yet you haven't been near enough surprised that he's not around here this mornin'."

"I've asked you two or three times," the boy mumbled, passing a trembling hand over his forehead. "Things're going around in my head funny. Where is he?"

"Dead."

"Dad? Dead? Why're you looking at me like that? I didn't know it. I swear I didn't hear any shot. I was too drunk to hear anything. Who did it?"

"I didn't say he was shot."

"But . . . you said . . ." the boy faltered.

"I said he was dead. You claim you didn't know anything about it, yet you said right off you didn't hear any shot. What made you think he'd been shot? Why didn't you just think he'd died natural?"

"I don't know. The way you're acting, I guess. First thing I thought of was that maybe somebody killed him."

"Why did you think that first?" Pat asked angrily. "Las' night you and Clay said he was too sick to have company. A man that sick could rightly be expected to die without being shot. You were lying about how sick he was, weren't you?"

"No. We weren't lying. He was mighty sick. But I just didn't think about him dying from it. Is that how it was?"

"He's laying back in his bed," Pat said gruffly. "Maybe you better come back and take a look."

"I don't feel so good," the boy groaned. "I think I'm going to be sick again."

"He ain't a nice sight," Pat agreed grimly. "But I reckon you better look at him just the same." He reached down and got hold of Dick's arm, lifted him bodily from his chair and propelled him back along the hall to the death-room opposite the boy's bedchamber.

Dick cast one frightened look at the contorted face and figure of the corpse when Pat threw back the cover, and then backed away, retching violently and sobbing at the same time.

Pat followed him back disgustedly, and let him go out the front door until the attack of sickness had passed.

When Dick came stumbling back, looking greenish about the mouth and holding his stomach with both hands, Pat told him angrily, "I don't know just what happened around here last night, but I sure aim to find out. Looks like Clay has took a run-out powder, leavin' you behind to face this alone. Surprises you, doesn't it? You thought Clay Porter was your friend?"

"He is. I-don't know where he is. Maybe he had an accident last night. Maybe one of the hawses kicked him. That roan I was ridin' is kind of mean."

Pat said, "Maybe. And maybe not. Do you still claim you didn't even know Bill was lying in there dead? Still claim you don't remember nothing after you got home last night?"

"It's the truth," Dick said huskily.

"You plumb sure you didn't figure it might be a good idea if Bill was to die before he had a chance to see that girl claiming to be his daughter from the East?"

A spasm of pain crossed Dick's young face. "What're you askin' these questions for?" he demanded. "Is it anybody's fault that Dad died durin' the night? Sure, I'm ashamed I was too drunk to even know he was bad sick, but that ain't no crime."

"Maybe not," said Pat heavily. "But I can't help thinking how handy it was for him to die right when he did. I reckon this ranch is willed to you, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I never asked him."

"But you know he figured on leavin' it to you. And that

girl comin' along might upset the applecart if she an' Bill had got together. I'm not forgettin'," he went on significantly, "how Clay Porter wouldn't let her come out here last night to see him. What was Clay's interest in it?"

"I don't know," Dick said bleakly. "You keep on actin' like you thought Dad was murdered 'stead of dying natural-like in bed."

"You saw his face and the way he was twisted up," said Pat harshly. "Does that look like he died easy in his sleep?"

"No," Dick agreed brokenly. "He must of been in pain. But it still doesn't prove I could of helped him if I'd been awake and sober."

Pat walked slowly over to the roll-top desk and stood looking down at it. "Didn't Bill always keep this desk closed?"

"Yeh." Dick had his face buried in his hands and wasn't looking at him.

"And locked?" Pat went on evenly.

"Sure. It was one of them kind that locked automatically when you closed the top down." Dick lifted his head and asked curiously, "Why're you askin' that?"

Pat said, "Come over here."

Dick got up reluctantly and went to his side. He gazed down at the litter of papers with lackluster eyes and said, "It looks like Dad was workin' here last evening and forgot to lock it."

"Did Bill ever leave his desk in that kind of mess when he was working on his papers?"

Dick licked his lips and shook his head, looking baffled. "Nope. He always put all the papers away when he was finished." He paused a moment and his voice trembled queerly, "Maybe he got took sick while he was working here."

"Was this desk standing open when you came home last night?"

"I dunno," Dick groaned. "I tell you I didn't notice an' don't remember. It might of been I guess. I went straight to my room and to bed as far's I know."

Pat closed the roll-top, and then pulled up on the handle.

The top lifted easily. Watching him, Dick's eyes widened and he sucked in his breath. "It ought've locked when you closed it like that. It always locked itself before."

"The lock's busted," Pat grunted. He pointed out the marks on the desk showing where it had been pried open. "Where'd your father keep the key?"

"On his key-ring," Dick faltered. He was looking down at the desk as though hypnotized by it. "I dunno why he'd have to pry it open less'n he lost the key or something."

"I don't think Bill did pry it open," Pat muttered angrily. "I think somebody else did . . . lookin' for something. You knew he had some papers in there tellin' about his real name being Wilcox and all, didn't you?"

Dick's jaw dropped open slackly. He didn't answer.

"Didn't you?" Pat seized him by the shoulder and shook him violently.

"No," whimpered the boy miserably. "I didn't know what he kept in the desk. You keep actin' like I done somethin' wrong."

Pat shoved him back roughly. "I ain't a bit sure but what you have. Maybe this ain't strictly legal, but I'm the sheriff and I guess I got a right to snoop. I'm going through these papers right now an' find out the truth about things . . . whether he's the man that Wilcox girl is lookin' for or not."

6.

PAT STEVENS HAD just finished going through every paper in the desk carefully when Sam got back to the ranch with Doc Trimble in tow. Doc was a fat little man with thick spectacles and an alcoholic complexion. At this hour of the morning Doc was still sober, though it was evident he'd had a few nips from an early bottle before Sam reached him in Dutch Springs.

He came stamping up the path to the Four-V's ranch house with his silvery hair gleaming in the sunlight and his black bag in his hand, and when Pat opened the door for him, he complained, "I don't know why you had Sam drag me out here like this, Sheriff. Bill Freeman's dead, isn't he? That calls for an undertaker rather than a physician."

"I want you do some official checkin' up, Doc." Pat glanced behind him at the slumped figure of Dick in a big rawhide chair. "I want to know what Bill died of, and when he died, and how sick he was last time you saw him."

"I saw him last week and he was a perfectly well man. Except for some wrenched muscles in his back from a fall. I advised him to stay off a horse for another month or so, and to take it easy. But he was as healthy as you are otherwise." The doctor stopped to look at the boy and sniffed the air suspiciously. "There wouldn't be drink in the house, would there?"

"I'm afraid not. Dick saw to that last night." Pat grinned and led the untidy little fat man toward the death-room, add-

ing. "If you've got anything for a hangover you can dose Dick up after you've looked at Bill."

"I don't know anything about hangovers," said Doc Trimble seriously. "Never have 'em myself."

"Way to work that is never get plumb sober, isn't it?" Pat asked with a grin.

The doctor wasn't at all abashed. "I find it a pleasant way at least. In here, eh?"

Pat stood aside to let the doctor go in first. Trimble glanced at the dead man on the bed, went to windows and lifted both shades to let brilliant sunlight flood the room. He came back to the bed and pulled the coverlet off Bill Freeman's twisted body.

Standing in the doorway, Pat's eyes widened in surprise as he did so. He'd only pulled the cover down to expose Bill's face previously, and hadn't realized the rancher was still fully clothed under the cover.

Doc Trimble frowned down at the corpse, and removed his glasses to wipe the thick lenses carefully with the tail of his shirt. He settled them back on his nose and said, "H-m-m."

Sam Sloan came up beside Pat as the doctor leaned over the body. He had stayed behind outside to tie up the doctor's team hitched to his buckboard, and he told Pat quietly, "Nobody I talked to has seen Clay Porter since yesterday. I passed the word around that you wanted him here."

Pat nodded. He was watching Doc Trimble with concentrated attention as the medico rolled back the corpse's eyelids, poked the stiff body here and there, and then bent to make a minute examination of his neck.

He straightened up and said brusquely, "Bill Freeman was strangled. Somebody choked him to death."

Pat straightened and let out a long rasping breath. It was what he had subconsciously known ever since he first looked at the contorted features of the dead man, but even so the official pronouncement from Trimble had a terrific impact.

He asked hoarsely, "How long's he been dead, Doc?"

"That's difficult to say." Trimble stepped back and cocked his head on one side and studied the corpse through half-

closed eyes. "Rigor mortis is complete. That means at least twelve hours. Possibly twenty." He dragged out a heavy gold watch and snapped it open. "It's a little after ten now. U-m-m. Some time between five yesterday afternoon and ten last night, for a guess."

"Can't you come closer than that, Doc? Don't the city doctors do things to set it closer than that?"

Doc Trimble pushed down his spectacles and glared at Pat over the gold rims. "I can do anything any city doctor can do. If you want a Post Mortem, why didn't you say so? I'll need to know exactly what he ate last, and exactly when he ate it."

Pat nodded and asked grimly, "Can you do it here, Doc? That post whatever it is it'll take?"

"Of course not," Trimble said scathingly. "I'll have to take him into my office. I need a stimulant for that sort of work."

Pat stepped back and told Sam, "Help Doc wrap him in a blanket and carry him out to the buckboard. Sooner you get at it the better, Doc."

He went back into the living room. Dick Freeman leaped up and blurted out, "Did he . . . what does the Doc say?"

"He says Bill Freeman's dead," Pat told him. "It was right after sundown when you an' Clay left the hotel. About seven o'clock. How fast did you ride comin' back?"

"I don't know." Dick's voice trembled. "Not very fast, the way I recollect it. But we came straight along."

"Didn't take you more'n an hour, I reckon?" Pat pressed him.

Dick shook his head and look bewildered. "I reckon not."

"Which'd put you-all here not later than eight," mused Pat. "Did you fix anything to eat after you got back?"

Dick shook his head miserably and mumbled, "I reckon not. I sure don't remember it if we did."

Sam Sloan came striding out, puffing under the weight of Bill Freeman's stiff body wrapped in a blanket. Dick recoiled and shuddered at the sight, covering his face with both hands. Pat detained the doctor as he was following Sam out,

"Can you tell anything about how drunk a fellow's been the night before by seeing him the next morning?"

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to look Dick over. He claims he drank a quart of whiskey las' night. A pint of it riding home, and the rest after he went to bed. He claims he don't remember anything after getting here about eight o'clock."

Doc Trimble's eyes glinted with curiosity behind their thick lenses. He didn't ask Pat any questions, but took the boy's pulse, looked at his tongue and eyes, checked his respiration and asked him a few questions.

He shrugged when he finished and told Pat, "He wasted a lot of whiskey last night, all right. If he's as unused to drinking as he says, a pint could easily black out his memory. He evidently threw up during the night, so he hasn't so much of it left in him."

Pat said, "He did. I saw the mess in his bedroom." He hesitated before asking, "Could he have done things after drinkin' a pint without remembering them? I mean . . . I've seen fellows that kept right on walkin' and talkin' and fightin', even, when they were passed out and didn't know what they were doing."

"You're asking if he could have strangled his father last night without knowing he did it this morning," the doctor said precisely without looking at Dick, speaking as though the boy wasn't there. He took off his glasses and polished them carefully.

"Yes. It's possible, Pat. The human mind has a peculiar way of protecting itself against such shocks. While drunk, there is a tendency to forget things one doesn't *wish* to remember." He settled the glasses back on his nose and looked at Dick curiously but without pity. "He knows subconsciously, of course, whether he did such an awful thing or not. He may not realize he knows it, but he *does*."

"I didn't," Dick sobbed out frantically. "I couldn't have done it. I was too drunk. I don't remember anything."

Both men completely disregarded his outburst. Doc Trim-

ble went on quietly, as though discussing nothing more important than the symptoms of a common cold:

"Alcohol has a way of releasing one from binding inhibitions, of stimulating secret and shameful desires. In other words, a drunken man is extremely unlikely to harm a person he loves. It's difficult to force him to do anything contrary to his innermost desires."

"You're tryin' to say," said Pat roughly, "that Dick couldn't have murdered Bill Freeman when he was drunk unless he'd been *thinkin'* about murdering him, and *wanting* to while he was sober."

Dr. Trimble said, "Precisely."

Pat said, "Come out into the kitchen." He led the way out, and explained briefly what Dick had told him about coming home the preceding night. "We still don't know where Clay Porter is nor what his story will be," Pat concluded, "but here's these dirty dishes. You were askin' what Bill ate last, an' when. There's a pot of beans on the back of the stove, an' you can see that beans and cold biscuits were eaten off that plate. Maybe Dick or Clay ate off it last night. There's two dirty coffee cups but just one dirty plate." He turned his head and called, "Come in here a minute, Dick."

Dick came to the door slowly. He kept opening his mouth and closing it, like a fish freshly drawn from the water. His bloodshot eyes were angry and staring.

Pat said, "First. Tell us when you and Clay left the ranch yesterday."

"About three o'clock."

"Were the dishes all cleaned up in here when you left?"

"Yes. I washed 'em after dinner. There was a pot of beans on the back of the stove an' some cold biscuits, and Dad told us he'd fix his supper if we weren't back by sundown."

"Would he have washed his dishes after he got through?"

"Can't you see he didn't?" asked Dick resentfully, gesturing toward the dirty dishes on the table. "He ain't been doing anything around the house since he hurt his back."

Pat said, "That's all," curtly, and turned to Dr. Trimble.

Dick didn't turn away from the doorway. In a voice that

held a curious mixture of wrath and fright, he exclaimed, "I can see what you're fixin' to do. You're tryin' to hang it on me. But I couldn't of done it. I was so blamed drunk I couldn't hardly stand up when I got off my hawse."

Pat said, "Go back and sit down." He shrugged and told Trimble, "There you are about what Bill ate last an' when. If we don't find out different from Clay, it looks like we can figure Bill ate some beans about sundown. Will that help?"

"It will help a great deal," Trimble told him. He studied Pat shrewdly and lowered his voice, "Do you think the boy in there did it? He always struck me as being weak but not vicious. A boy'd have to have a mighty strong streak of meanness in him to up and kill a man who'd been as good to an orphan as Bill Freeman has been to him."

Pat said, "I know." He didn't tell Doc Trimble about the possible motive for murder in the person of the attractive young girl from Philadelphia who threatened to displace Dick as Bill Freeman's heir. He simply said, "You can see why the time Bill got killed may be mighty important. When we find Clay, we may know a lot more about it."

Sam Sloan entered the front door excitedly as the two men came out of the kitchen. "Jess Dorr is ridin' up the road with Clay Porter," he reported. "I got you all loaded up, Doc."

Trimble said, "I'll be getting along." He went out to his buckboard and Pat followed him out to stand on the steps.

Jess Dorr was a neighboring rancher whose spread adjoined the Four-V's on the north. His headquarters was about six miles northward, along the upper slope of the Valley. He was a big, raw-boned, taciturn man with a meek wife and a brood of seven children at home. He and Clay Porter were loping up the road from the north side by side. They turned into the ranchyard and checked their horses twenty feet from the doorway in which Pat was standing. Porter flung himself from the saddle and stalked forward, his features dark with wrath.

"What's this all about, Sheriff? Jess came ridin' out to hunt me up and say I was wanted here *pronto*. One of his boys

heard it in town that you was gettin' out a warrant for me. What the hell's the idee?"

Pat hooked his thumbs in the front of his gunbelt and nodded toward Dr. Trimble's buckboard disappearing in a cloud of dust toward town. "Doc's takin' Bill Freeman to town."

"Is he took bad?"

"Dead," Pat said laconically.

"Shore now, that's tough," Porter ejaculated. "I didn't know he was that bad off."

"Did you come home with Dick last night?"

"I shore did. If I hadn't he mightn't of made it home."

"Drunk, huh?"

"Drunk as a hoot owl."

"On a bottle of whiskey you bought for him?"

"Awright," blustered Clay Porter. "So I bought it for him. I figured he needed it las' night. He was mighty down in the mouth about that gal poppin' up and claimin' to be Bill's real daughter."

"So you got him drunk?" Pat said angrily.

Porter shrugged. "I didn't know he was drinkin' so much on the way home. He was holdin' it good till he got off his hawse right in front of the door. Then I saw he'd downed near half of the bottle an' couldn't hardly stand up."

Pat's eyes narrowed to slits. "What did you do?"

"Me?" Porter frowned at the question. "I unsaddled his hawse for him an' then I rode on over to Jess's to put up for the night. I didn't hanker to nursemaid a drunk kid, and I wanted to get an early start this mornin' working some of our dogies down outta them high coulees next to Jess's south fence. Saved me a couple of hours workin' time by startin' at daylight from there, and without no help these days there ain't enough daylight hours to get all the work done."

"Did you tell Bill or Dick where you were going?"

Porter shook his head. "I'd told Bill yesterday afternoon. I just rode on over to Jess's after unsaddlin' Dick's hawse for him."

"Didn't you go in the house at all? To see Dick got to bed all right?"

"No, I didn't. I figgered he could make it to bed. Look here, Stevens. Why're you askin' all these questions?"

"Bill Freeman was murdered last night." Pat's words were harsh and angry. He turned his attention to Jess Dorr who had dismounted and sauntered forward. "What time did Clay reach your house last night?"

"I reckon 'twas about eight-thirty. Not much later'n that. Mirandy was still settin' up with me and she fixed him some vittles when he said he hadn't et no supper."

"And he stayed there all night?"

"Till daylight this mawnin'. He was honin' to git out an' git started to work pushin' them dogies down to lower ground 'fore we got a heavy snow in the hills."

"Where did you find him just now?"

"Up yonder where he said he'd be. He had a dozen calves rounded up when I come on him."

"See here, Sheriff." Clay Porter stepped close and tilted his head to look up into Pat's face as he stood on the porch above him. The Four-V's foreman's voice was rough but subdued, "You say Bill was *murdered*? How? Who done it? Did Dick see him?"

"Dick claims he was passed out dead drunk. That's your doin'."

"D'yuh reckon . . . *he* could have done it?"

Pat said, "I'm taking him in for it." He turned and went into the house, told the boy quietly, "Pack yourself a few clothes, son. Enough to last you a few days in jail anyhow."

7.

DICK FREEMAN REMAINED in a dazed and sullen mood all during the ride to town and while Pat was locking him up in the iron-barred adobe jail at the rear of the courthouse. He accepted his arrest apathetically, and for the life of him, Pat couldn't decide whether that was a sign of guilt or not.

At the ranch, Clay Porter had hotly argued with Pat about arresting the boy, insisting there wasn't a shred of real evidence against him, pointing out that the boy was so drunk anyone might have stopped by the ranch during the night and committed the murder without waking Dick from his drunken stupor.

This, Pat had to admit was quite true; but where was the motive for anyone else to murder Bill Freeman? Even Porter had to admit that Freeman didn't have a single known enemy. Yet he insisted that Dick didn't have any motive either. Even if it *should* turn out that Bill Freeman was really named William Wilcox.

Pat didn't waste time arguing the point with Porter at the ranch. For one thing, he knew Dick Freeman would be safer locked up in jail after the citizens of the Valley learned the details of Freeman's murder and the youth's lack of an alibi. He was bound to be suspected by Freeman's many friends, and Pat figured it would be better all around to have him locked up safe while the investigation proceeded. If he was guilty it would prevent his making a getaway; and if innocent, it might easily prevent a miscarriage of frontier justice.

Clay Porter rode into town with the trio, angry and silent and preoccupied. He stood at the jail door as Pat was locking the boy up, to give him a final word of advice and encouragement:

"I don't believe you ever done it, Dick. Don't get to broodin' over what maybe *might* have happened while you were too drunk to remember. I'm gonna do some investigatin' myself, an' I'll see that you ain't railroaded."

Pat Stevens padlocked the iron door and walked slowly back to the lean-to office in the rear where Sam was waiting. Clay Porter followed him, his face dark with anger and his jaw aggressively outthrust.

"I'm takin' a hand in this deal," he announced, following Pat into the small office. "I reckon I'm about the only friend Dick'll have when word gets around you've arrested him."

Pat pulled off his hat and tossed it on a nail in the wall. "I need all the help I can get," he admitted frankly. "But I wanta warn you, Clay, that you're not in too good a spot yourself. If we prove Dick did it while he was drunk, you got to remember it was you that got him drunk. That makes you what the law calls an accessory before the fact, I reckon . . . an' you can get a good long time in prison for that."

"Don't you reckon I'm thinkin' about that?" raged Clay Porter. "Shore, you'd like nothin' better'n to send me up too. That's one reason I aim to prove it wasn't Dick."

"Fair enough," Pat agreed. "But I reckon you got to admit Dick didn't like the idee of losing out on the ranch to that girl at the hotel."

"Shore, it sorta flabbergasted him," Porter snorted hotly. "But he didn't think for a minute she was tellin' the truth. He wasn't worried none. Neither one of us ever heard Bill Freeman say anything about bein' named Wilcox."

"That'll all come out as soon as Winters gets back from Pueblo," Sam observed.

"Shore it will. That's why Dick wasn't worryin' none about losing the ranch last night," snarled Porter. "We talked about it ridin' home an' he was plumb easy in his mind about waitin' for Winters to get back and tell who Wilcox really is."

Pat said, "If you can prove that, I'll admit Dick didn't have any reason to murder his foster-father."

Porter's features darkened grimly. "You got my word for it."

"Which ain't enough," Pat told him flatly. "You're a good friend of Dick's, an' maybe he promised you part of the ranch if you'd help him get it."

With a smothered curse, Porter swung his fist at the point of the seated sheriff's jaw. Pat rocked sideways with the force of the blow, and Sam Sloan leaped in with his gun drawn. He slammed the heavy barrel of his .45 across the side of Porter's head, and the Four-V's foreman crumpled up on the floor with a loud sigh. Sam leaned over him and extracted his gun from its holster, straightened up to ask Pat, "How bad did he hurt you?"

"Not too bad." Pat straightened his chair and waggled his jaw wryly. "I sort of asked for that," he admitted. "How bad did you hurt him?"

"He's comin' 'round," Sam announced disgustedly. "I didn't get a good enuff swing or I woulda cracked his head wide open."

Porter groaned and struggled up to a sitting position. His hand darted down to his empty holster, and he glared malevolently at Sam when he found his gun missing.

"Get up off the floor," Pat said tersely. "An' give him back his six-gun, Sam."

"I better keep it. He's liable to . . ."

"He's not liable to do nothin'," Pat said evenly. "Don't swing on me again," he admonished Porter mildly as the man got to his feet.

"I had plenty of cause," Porter said thickly. "You as good as accused me of coverin' up for Dick so's to get a cut out of the ranch after he gets it."

"I didn't accuse you of anything. I showed you why your evidence mightn't be accepted in court. Holster your gun and ease up a little."

Sam handed him back his .45 butt first, and Porter hesitated a moment before shoving it down into its leather.

"Maybe I did go off half-cocked," he muttered ungraciously, "but I shore didn't like what you were thinkin'."

"I got to think that way," said Pat shortly. "Right now I don't know anybody that could have had a reason to kill Bill Freeman except Dick. Him being afraid Bill might really be the William Wilcox the girl is lookin' for."

"S'pose he was?" argued Porter. "What good would it do Dick to kill him? That wouldn't change anythin'. If the gal is Bill's daughter an' can prove it, she'll still get the ranch, won't she?"

Pat leaned back and got out the makings and thoughtfully rolled a cigarette. "Dick might've thought she couldn't prove it if Bill died before she got to him for him to recognize her."

"Mr. Winters is still s'posed to know all about it," Porter reminded him.

"Dick was mighty drunk las' night. Maybe he forgot about Winters."

"There must be some papers to show he was Wilcox . . . if he was. He had all sorts of papers in that desk of his he kept locked."

"Why d'yuh reckon he always kept his desk locked?" Pat parried. "Sounds like he must have had something to hide, all right."

"Not necessarily. It was the kind that locked every time you shut it down. I've heard Bill cuss it more'n once when it locked on him an' he'd forgot to put on his key-chain."

Solid footsteps pounded along the board-walk outside and stopped at the door. There was an impatient knock as the three men turned their heads to listen. Sam Sloan took a step forward and pulled the door open. It was Joan Wilcox's fiancé.

Paul Munson was frowning with worry and his black eyes were narrowed. He stepped inside and said abruptly, "I've been hearing rumors around town that Joan's father was murdered last night. Is that true?"

"Bill Freeman was murdered," Pat told him.

The Easterner clamped his lips together and thrust his square jaw forward. "Are you trying to becloud the issue,

Sheriff? Didn't we agree last night that this man who calls himself Freeman must really be William Wilcox?"

"You an' the girl sort of decided that between yourselves," Pat drawled. "I haven't seen any real proof of it yet."

Munson took another step forward and struck his doubled fist down on the table in front of Pat. "It sounds to me like a plot to deprive Miss Wilcox of her rightful inheritance. You and your deputy here both recognized Freeman from his picture. Are you going to deny that?"

"Wait a minute," protested Pat. "I can't say that Sam or me either one *recognized* Bill Freeman. We said it looked sort of like him."

"So you're backing out on us now?" said Munson scornfully. "Looks to me like a put-up job between you and that adopted boy, and maybe this foreman here." He looked at Clay Porter venomously. "You prevented us from going out to the ranch last night to establish Joan's claim . . . and now her father is murdered before she is able to reach him."

Pat's gray eyes were bleak as he surveyed the angry Easterner before him. "You sound like you think I knew Bill Freeman was due to be killed last night."

"What am I supposed to think?" Munson demanded. "Looks to me as though you're all in it together."

Sam Sloan was standing back and a little to one side of Paul Munson. His face darkened with anger and he took one step forward, swung a back-handed slap against the young man's cheek that sent him reeling back against the door.

He straightened up and started forward with blazing eyes and swinging fists, but Pat shoved his chair back and leaped in between the two men.

"You had it comin'," he grated at Munson. "Stand back before I throw you in jail. And you lay off, Sam," he threw over his shoulder angrily. "You're gettin' too danged free with yore gun and fists this mornin'."

"Did you hear what he said?" Sam demanded. "Plain accusin' you of helpin' to murder Bill Freeman."

Pat nodded. He said grimly, "Munson don't savvy things in Powder Valley very good." He turned back to the East-

erner and said, "You're talkin' like a fool. You know Mr. Winters has got proof whether Bill Freeman's name was Wilcox or not. Soon as he gets back to town an' says it's so, she can put in her claim for Bill's ranch."

Paul Munson was holding a handkerchief up to his rapidly darkening cheek. "How do I know he isn't in the plot with you too? Maybe you've fixed it with him to deny the whole thing? Perhaps I don't know much about you Westerners, but I know what my fiancée's legal rights are."

Pat reached behind him and jerked the door open. He said, "Get out."

"I've got a right here. I demand . . ."

Pat put his calloused palm against Munson's face and shoved hard. The young man staggered backward over the threshold, and Pat pulled the door shut with a slam.

Clay Porter laughed softly as Pat stalked back and picked up his overturned chair. "Looks like yo're right plumb in the middle, Sheriff."

Pat didn't laugh. He sat down and pulled his six-gun. Resting it carelessly on the table in front of him, he said, "You can get out too, Clay."

Porter started to protest, but a look at Pat's face changed his mind. He said hastily and weakly, "All right. No need to get on yore high-horse," and went out the door.

Pat sighed and looked over at Sam Sloan, "Purty soon they'll have me thinkin' I choked Bill Freeman to death last night."

Sam laughed and pulled up a chair to sit down opposite him. "It's mighty funny how folks get wringy about gettin' holt of a dead man's property. When he ain't even buried yet. Looks tuh me like the hull thing'd be easy settled by lookin' through Bill's papers tuh see was he named Wilcox or not."

Pat shook his head wearily. "I went through everything in that desk at the ranch. Not a thing showing he is or ain't Wilcox. But that desk was broke into last night, and somebody else had been through the papers first. I reckon if there was any proof, it's gone by now."

"Dick?" Sam exclaimed. "He had the same idea after killin' Bill. He knew it wouldn't do him no good if there was any proof in the desk."

"Looks like that's it." Pat frowned and reholstered his gun. "But it doesn't add up to Dick bein' as drunk as he and Clay claim. With a pint of whiskey inside him, I don't believe he'd have sense enough to search the desk."

"We just got his word an' Clay's that he *was* that drunk," Sam reminded him.

"There wasn't much doubt about his hangover this mornin'. And I had Doc Trimble check him just to make sure he wasn't putting on. Doc ought to know how much a man has been drinkin'."

"Shore," said Sam excitedly, "but we don't know *when* he drank that quart of whiskey. S'pose him and Clay are both lying, an' he didn't drink any on the way home. He could of did what he thought he had tuh do while he was cold sober, then went to bed with the bottle so's he could pretend he was so drunk in the night he didn't even wake up when Bill was gettin' killed."

Pat's fist thumped softly on the table. "That makes more sense than anything I've thought up yet. If they were in it together . . . an' fixed up their story las' night before Clay rode off to Dorr's to get himself an alibi. Yessir. I think we've got Dick right where he belongs to be right now."

8.

MR. WINTERS HAD had himself a very good time in Pueblo. Now, he was paying for it. He held his aching head in both hands as the little combination train jolted its way through the hot afternoon toward Hopewell Junction, and he was glad it would be another six months before he went to Pueblo again.

The Dutch Springs storekeeper and postmaster always managed to have a good time on his semi-annual buying trips to the southern Colorado city, and on his way home he was always fervently glad they came only every six months. He was a big jovial man, a widower for many years, and his general store was the only one in Powder Valley. Supplying the needs of ranchers within a radius of fifty miles, Mr. Winters had a very large business and, consequently, was one of the most important out-of-town customers of the big wholesale house with which he dealt. As such, the salesmen and executives of the wholesale concern always entertained him lavishly while he was in the city, and saw to it that he enjoyed himself.

Like last night, for instance. Mr. T. Mayhew Grant, general manager of the wholesale house, had been his host for his last night in the city. Also a widower, ten years younger than his guest, and with an unlimited expense account at his disposal, Mr. Grant had provided an evening of lavish entertainment.

On the whole, it had really been all clean fun. Mr. Winters

was a deacon in the Dutch Springs church and not a man of sinful inclinations, but not too old to enjoy kicking up his heels while in the city. Although in his middle fifties, he still appreciated a well-turned calf and a pretty face; and it had been a pleasant surprise when he entered the suite in Pueblo's best hotel that Mr. Grant had engaged for the occasion and found Carol and Caprice waiting for him with his host.

Both girls were quite young and quite beautiful. Wearing a daring amount of rouge and low-necked evening gowns that displayed a great deal of their white shoulders and smooth bosoms, they were drinking bubbly champagne out of long-stemmed crystal glasses when Mr. Winters made his appearance.

Carol was tall and dark-haired and slender, with a large bust and a very small waist. She held herself gracefully and had a very ladylike manner. Caprice was fluffy and blonde and plump. She giggled a lot in a high-pitched voice, and called T. Mayhew Grant, "Daddicums" and pawed him affectionately after getting outside of three glasses of champagne.

Mr. Winters thought Caprice was a cute little thing, but he was well pleased that he was not the object of her affections. Carol was more reserved, and much more to the liking of the deacon of the Dutch Springs church. She had a lazy way of lifting long black eyelashes to look up at him, and a grave smile for his somewhat heavy-handed witticisms. She was the sort of girl (Mr. Winters thought to himself) with whom a man could be friendly and let himself go for an evening of fun without fearing the affair would go too far.

So it had been a very successful evening. Mr. Winters and Carol sat side by side on a red plush love seat and drank champagne and he told her about his store in Dutch Springs and the lighter side of life in Powder Valley until a pair of white-coated waiters served an excellent dinner in the private living room of the suite.

There were exotic things to eat served under silver domes, with a cold white wine to accompany the fish course, and

sparkling Burgundy with the meat, and a sweet liqueur in tiny glasses after the dessert.

Mr. Winters was not a drinking man, but he liked to let himself go twice a year while he was in the city. By the end of his liqueur, he was squeezing Carol's hand, and he found himself somewhat wistfully (if fuzzily) wishing she weren't quite so ladylike.

Carol did let him kiss her cheek while he was helping her on with her wrap preparatory to a visit to the Golden Moon dancehall and gambling establishment de luxe on the outskirts of town. Now, as he sat in the stuffy little coach at the end of a string of cattle cars bouncing toward Hopewell Junction and recalled the incident, he found himself believing he might have kissed her lips instead of her cheek if he'd been just a bit more insistent. Carol's lips had been red and luscious and, well, inviting. He remembered the smell of her perfume as she stood close to him, and he didn't mind his headache and the bad taste in his mouth so much.

She had danced very close to him at the Golden Moon too, and hadn't seemed to mind at all when he pressed his cheek against her hair.

Yes, he decided, as he bumped on toward Hopewell Junction, Carol had certainly liked him a lot. He couldn't help believing he had given her something of a thrill, and the belief brought him a feeling of devilish pride.

There had been more drinks at the Golden Moon, and all of them had a fling at the roulette tables. There, too, Carol had displayed a sweetness and discretion that pleased him. She hadn't begged for money to throw away on the spinning wheel, but had even remonstrated with him in a nice way when he insisted on buying her a second stack of chips.

An extremely well-mannered and nice girl, Mr. Winters thought happily. He wondered what her background was, how she happened to be a friend of a cheap little flirt like Caprice—and whether it might be possible to get her address from Mr. Grant so he could write her a little note of thanks for the pleasant evening she had shared with him.

His head didn't ache so much, and his outraged stomach

became less jumpy as he indulged in these pleasant reveries. He thought perhaps he shouldn't stay away from the city so long this time. After all, six months was quite a long time between buying trips. It would be nice to see Carol again, he thought vaguely, not in the company of Mr. Grant and Caprice.

Carol had showed him last night that she didn't think him so old. She had expressed surprise when he admitted to forty-five years, ten years less than his actual age, and said that he seemed much younger than that when he danced.

Things got a little hazy in his memory after that. There'd been more drinks after the gambling—and more dancing, he thought. Then the ride through the night in the back seat of Mr. Grant's carriage with Carol snuggled up confidently against him beneath the robe like an unafraid child.

He had been quite drunk by that time. He wished now that he hadn't been so drunk. He thought she might have liked it if he had slipped his arm about her waist and perhaps tipped her face up to be kissed.

He forgot all about his pounding headache as his thoughts dwelt on what-might-have-been.

Then the little combination train was jolting to a stop, and the brakeman came through the coach yelling, "Hopewell Junction," and he sat up and blinked his tired eyes and got down his leather valise from overhead and prepared to get off the train.

He was the only passenger to leave the train at the small way-station, and it pulled away again with a great grinding jerk as soon as he stepped down onto the cinder-covered platform in front of the unpainted frame depot.

Hopewell Junction consisted of a small collection of small houses huddled together dejectedly on the broad Colorado plain, sun-baked and desolate, and without apparent reason for its existence.

Actually, it was no more than a shipping point for cattle from Powder Valley, and the wooden railroad pens covered an area twice as large as the town itself.

Mr. Winters tugged the brim of his hat down over his

eyes against the glaring, white-hot, mid-afternoon sun and walked past the railroad station down the dusty street toward the stage depot where the stagecoach waited to pick up passengers and mail and express shipments for Powder Valley and beyond.

A team of four horses stood listlessly in harness in front of the coach, and the driver was stowing away some limp mailbags in the space on top of the vehicle when Mr. Winters walked up and set his valise down with a sigh.

The driver was a wizened little man known as Taw Drummond. He had been on this run for many years and had often driven the Dutch Springs storekeeper back from his trips to Pueblo. He grinned down knowingly from his perch high up on the coach, and called, "Howdy there, Mr. Winters? Have a good trip this time?"

Winters took off his hat and mopped his sweating face. "So-so, Taw. It'll be good to get back home."

"Rest up fer another six months, hey?" Taw Drummond cackled at his own wit. "Mighty high times they have in thuh city, I do hear tell."

Winters replaced his hat and sighed again. "I go to the city only on business trips."

The driver cackled more loudly as he climbed down. "Monkey bizness, hey? I notice yo're allus mighty droopy an' fagged out when yuh git back. Them city gals are great ones fer draggin' a man around, hey?"

Winters said, "That's utter nonsense, Taw." He felt his face growing hot under the little man's grinning scrutiny, and he picked up his valise and opened the stagecoach door. "As a matter of fact I don't feel too well today. Something I ate last night must have disagreed with me." He leaned forward to look inside the hot, dim interior, adding, "I hope you haven't too many passengers this trip."

"Nary a one but you, Mr. Winters. It'd be cooler if yuh sat up front with me."

"No thanks," Winters declined stiffly. "I can settle back inside and close my eyes. Just don't take it too fast around the curves."

The driver chuckled loudly as his passenger stepped inside the swaying coach. "I got my schedule tuh keep. You know that. I ain't bin late in Dutch Springs since thuh wash-out three years ago." He slammed the door shut from the outside, and Mr. Winters sank back gratefully on the back seat.

It was stifling inside the coach, but it was quiet, and the swaying of it on its oiled springs after Drummond crawled up on the high driver's seat in front and put the four-horse team in motion was soothing and sleep-inducing.

Mr. Winters settled back and closed his eyes and started thinking about Carol again. He wished he knew her last name. Last night, he hadn't cared, hadn't even thought it was queer when Grant introduced her only by her first name. All the dancehall girls in the city were known only by their first names, and he'd supposed she was just one of those whom Grant had picked up to entertain him for the evening.

But now he could scarcely believe that's what she was. She seemed much too refined to be a mere dancehall entertainer. He had a feeling she didn't do that sort of thing regularly—that she had accepted Grant's invitation just as a sort of lark, perhaps. Or (and this thought made him feel warm and comfortable inside) perhaps because she knew who Grant's masculine guest was going to be and had taken that opportunity to become acquainted with him. After all, Mr. Winters reminded himself, he wasn't totally unknown in Pueblo. It was quite possible he had been pointed out to Carol on the street.

It was a pleasant thought. He dawdled with it while he let his head lie back comfortably and the swaying of the coach brought on slumber.

In his sleep he dreamed of Carol. He dreamed he was bolder than he had dared to be and instead of kissing her cheek had put his fingers beneath her chin and lifted it to kiss her sweet lips.

It was a nice dream. The nicest dream Mr. Winters had had for more than twenty years.

Halfway between Hopewell Junction and Dutch Springs,

the stage road climbed from the flat plain and entered a rough and broken area of steep ridges and deep ravines leading upward over a low mountain pass and down into the upper end of Powder Valley itself. The road twisted and wound precariously along man-made ledges hewn out of the mountainside, and at times there was a sheer drop of several hundred feet on one side of the road while the steep slope rose abruptly several hundred feet on the other side.

At one such point not more than two miles from the entrance to the Valley, the overhanging cliff above the road actually jutted out so it was a sheer drop of almost five hundred feet to the narrow ledge below over which the coach must pass.

On this hot afternoon a man on horseback might have been seen silhouetted against the rough escarpment overlooking the stage road. He sat easily in the saddle, motionless and waiting, not more than ten feet back from the brink itself.

His horse faced away from the edge of the cliff, and the end of his lariat was twisted several times around his saddle-horn with the knotted end securely in his hand.

From the saddle-horn, the rope stretched tautly behind him, circling the trunk of an aged oak tree that in past generations had somehow caught a root-hold on the very face of the rocky precipice and leaned outward at an angle that defied gravity, gnarled and twisted, and defiant of the elements that sought to deny it the right to live.

From around the trunk of the tree which acted as a rude sort of pulley, the lariat led back at an angle to the looped end which was fastened tightly about a jutting protuberance on the top of a huge boulder balanced on the very rim of the cliff above the road.

The edge of the cliff beneath and in front of the tons-heavy boulder had been loosened and dug away with a pick-axe to a point where the boulder was almost ready to fall from its insecure perch directly down to the roadway beneath.

Horse and rider waited patiently in the still, hot air. As Taw Drummond had boasted to Mr. Winters, he had an

undeviating schedule for his route, and the rider knew the lumbering stage was due to pass beneath the balanced rock within a very few minutes.

He smiled grimly and straightened in the saddle when he heard the creaking of the stage and the sound of trotting hoofs from the still canyon below as the unwieldy vehicle climbed upward along the shelf road toward the waiting doom from above.

The rider tightened his reins and leaned forward to speak soothingly to his horse who snorted and pointed his ears toward the sound of the approaching stage.

"Steady, boy," the rider said softly. "We don't wanta be too quick on the trigger an' mess things up."

He waited tensely, leaned forward in the saddle with his big-roweled spurs ready.

The stage was close now. He could hear Taw Drummond amiably cursing his lead team, could hear the sharp crack of his blacksnake whip above their ears.

When he judged the lead team was directly beneath the balanced death on the edge of the cliff, he struck his spurs into the sides of his mount.

The horse lunged forward, throwing more than half a ton of straining weight against the taut rope from his saddlehorn.

The pull was transmitted around the leaning oak tree and back to the boulder. It swayed ponderously and gave way, plunging directly downward on top of the stagecoach and its unsuspecting driver and sleeping passenger.

The loop of the lariat slacked and fell loose from the rocky protuberance as the huge boulder went crashing down, and the rider gathered it up swiftly, reining in his horse who sprang away as the rope suddenly went limp.

There was a resounding crash from the road below. The sound echoed upward from the narrow canyon and was followed by the shrill screams of mortally frightened horses as stage and horses were inexorably swept off the narrow ledge and down the steep slope beneath the road to the floor of the canyon several hundred feet below.

The rider nodded with savage exultation at these sounds indicating the complete success of his murder scheme, wheeled his mount to gallop forward a few hundred feet to a point where the downward slope flattened out enough to permit a descent.

He put his horse over the edge at a headlong gallop, down to the winding road beneath, and on over that to the floor of the canyon a short distance from the tangled wreckage of the smashed coach and screaming horses who fought to get free of their harness.

He galloped forward, disregarding the anguished squeals of the two lead horses who had survived the crash with only broken legs, and surveyed the scene of wreckage with grim satisfaction.

He had planned his deed well. The huge boulder had fallen directly on the rear quarters of the wheel team and the front of the coach, crushing the driver beneath its weight.

The body of Winters had been thrown free from the crushed wreckage of the coach by some freak of fate, and he lay motionless on his back ten feet away.

The rider spurred his trembling horse forward with a curse, leaped off and leaned over the storekeeper to ascertain if he still lived. He cursed again when he felt a faint pulse beating in the storekeeper's wrist, stepped back and drew his gun.

He hesitated a moment, and then resheathed the weapon. All his careful planning and work to make this appear an accident would go for nothing if Mr. Winters was found with a bullet wound as the evident cause of death.

He searched around for a moment and found a rough rock weighing about ten pounds, stalked back with it and leaned over the unconscious man, smashed the heavy rock down into his face with a snarling sigh of satisfaction.

He stepped back to study the corpse a moment, satisfied that the death blow would be accepted as one of the natural injuries resulting from the accident, then remounted his horse with the blood-stained rock still clutched in his hand.

He carried the rock with him back along the bottom of

the canyon to a point where the slope made egress possible, tossed the rock away into a clump of bushes and spurred up to the roadway above, then pushed his horse into a gallop toward Powder Valley, smugly certain that no one would ever suspect a crime had been committed behind him.

9.

PAT STEVENS AND EZRA and Sam Sloan were grouped closely together at the end of the bar in the Gold Eagle Saloon waiting for the afternoon stagecoach to bring Mr. Winters home from Hopewell Junction.

Like all the other decent citizens of the Valley, big, one-eyed, hulking Ezra had been aroused to violent anger when he heard that his old friend Bill Freeman had been cold-bloodedly murdered in his bed, and like many others he had ridden into Dutch Springs immediately to learn what was what.

There had been a lot of excited milling around and a lot of wild talk about stringing up Dick Freeman for the crime that first afternoon, but Pat had deputized Sam and Ezra, and several other more sober citizens, and had passed the word around that there was no conclusive evidence against Dick so that the lynching talk had gradually died away.

Only a few people knew the real reason for the presence of the two Easterners in town, and they had been sworn to secrecy. Until Mr. Winters returned and corroborated their story, Pat had advised them to remain quietly at the Jewel Hotel and do no talking; Pat's idea being that if Freeman's murder had no connection with Joan Wilcox's claim against his estate, it would be better to keep the entire affair quiet in the hope that the real murderer would make some slip and reveal himself.

Up to this time, Pat was very much on the fence about the

whole thing. Doc Trimble's examination of the dead rancher's body and his findings had not clarified the issue at all. It was Doc's opinion that Freeman had been murdered within an hour of the time he ate supper. He arrived at this conclusion, he explained to Pat, by studying the contents of the rancher's stomach to ascertain how far the process of digestion had gone before death had interrupted it.

He made it about an hour after supper-time, but that was still inconclusive. According to Clay Porter and Bill's adopted son, Freeman had been accustomed to eat about sundown. They had stated, in fact, that he had told them he would fix his own supper if they weren't back from town by sundown. But no one knew for sure that he *had* said that; nor that he had done it even if he had said so.

It was quite possible, Pat figured, that he might have waited until well past his usual supper-time, expecting them to return. On the other hand, alone at the ranch he might have gotten hungry earlier than usual so there wasn't any way of setting the time of death definitely.

Even if you did accept eight o'clock as the most probable hour, that didn't clear Dick Freeman of suspicion. He and Clay both admitted leaving town about seven, and taking about an hour for the ride home. According to their stories, Bill might even have been killed before they arrived, or he might have been murdered afterward while Dick lay in bed in a drunken stupor.

There just wasn't any way of proving any of it. If you believed Clay and Dick, Clay hadn't entered the house at all after returning from town, and Dick had been so drunk he stumbled straight to his own bedroom without seeing his foster-father.

This left the whole thing wide open again. If Dick had been as drunk as they both claimed, it was entirely possible that Clay could have entered the house and killed his employer before riding over to spend the night at the neighboring ranch. Or maybe Dick was lying about being drunk when he got home. Maybe he waited until Clay rode off, and then

strangled Freeman and crawled into bed with a quart of whiskey to drink himself into unconsciousness.

"We've just got to wait until we know *why* Bill Freeman was killed," Pat said patiently for perhaps the hundredth time while he and his two partners stood at the bar waiting for the stage to arrive. "As far as we know he didn't have an enemy in the world. But that's just as far as we know. He hadn't made any enemies in the ten years he lived here, but we don't know anything about his life before that."

"It's shore the truth," Ezra marveled, twisting his scarred face into a grimace and lifting a glass of whiskey. "I bin out talkin' around to people all day like you told me, an' nary a one of 'em ever heard Bill talk about things before he come here."

"Except jest that he was from Texas an' sold out down there for cash when the drought got bad," Sam Sloan added with a shake of his head. "Bill was plumb close-mouthed 'bout his bizniss."

"Stands tuh reason he was killed on account of this purty gal an' her man pōppin' up from thuh East to claim him for a pappy," Ezra put in sourly. "You cain't get away from the fac' that it happened that very night . . . after Bill had lived here peaceful for ten years."

"It shore looks like there's got to be some connection," Pat agreed soberly. "Somebody went through his desk lookin' for something."

"Dick's the only one that'd have a reason for killin' him before the gal put in her claim."

"All that depends on *if* he was her daddy," Pat pointed out. "We still haven't any real proof of that. She don't even know. When I took her over to look at him in Doc Trimble's office, she admitted she couldn't tell after all these years, an' with his face twisted up like it is. She was only nine years old when she saw her father the last time."

"There's a mighty spunky gal," Sam said admiringly. "Come thousands of miles to find her daddy, an' then have him murdered the night she gets here 'fore she even sets eyes on him. It's enough tuh give most gals thuh screamin' mee-

mies. But not her. She's got a tough streak in her that's plenty like ol' Bill Freeman. I'm bettin' she's his gal awright."

"We'll find out mighty quick." Pat glanced up at the big clock over the bar. "Stage is mighty nigh due."

Even as he spoke, the hoofbeats of a hard-driven and laboring horse were heard entering town from the east. The three men looked at each other and listened intently, and Ezra muttered angrily, "Some dang fool has rode the laigs plumb off his hawse. He'll be lucky if he makes it this far." They all turned and went curiously to push out the swinging doors of the saloon and see who the horse-killing rider was.

He was coming up Main Street in a cloud of dust, sitting erect in the saddle and flailing his lathered black with a quirt. The horse had his head low and he stumbled as he came on gallantly under his rider's lash, found a final burst of speed that brought him up in front of the Gold Eagle where he staggered to a stop, stood on braced legs drawing great wheezing breaths through blood-red nostrils.

The rider was a big man, a complete stranger to the trio who moved across the board-walk toward him. He wore a black sateen shirt and a black Stetson, smooth leather chaps and big-roweled spurs on his heels. He wore one gun, in an open holster on a cartridge-studded belt outside his chaps. It was a right-hand holster, but he wore it on the front of his left thigh with the black butt of a .45 resting against his left groin.

In all his life, Pat Stevens had seen only one other man who carried his gun in that peculiar way. That was Tombstone Jake, a cold-blooded killer with seventeen notches on his gun. Tombstone boasted the fastest draw in Arizona when Pat knew him, clearing leather across the front of his body with a sweeping motion that swung the muzzle into shooting position a split-second faster than any of his opponents who trusted the orthodox draw.

The black-garbed stranger flung his body from the saddle and lunged toward the men on the board-walk, shouting hoarsely, "The stage. Back yonder. They're dead. All dead."

"What's happened, stranger?" Pat pushed forward. "Who's dead?"

"Them that were ridin' thuh stage," the man panted. Though his voice was hoarse and excited it retained a distinctive Texas drawl. "It passed me this side of Hopewell Junction an' I come on thuh place half an hour later. Landslide, it looks like. Took a piece out of thuh road an' smashed thuh stage to the bottom of thuh canyon. I rode down fer a quick look. Two of 'em daid. I didn't see no others. Damn near killed my hawse bringin' thuh news."

Pat and his companions didn't wait to hear more. Other men were running up to hear the news, and they knew that plenty of help would follow them as soon as horses could be saddled. The three men leaped to their saddled mounts at the hitching rail and thundered out of town eastward a few moments later. They didn't waste time talking. In the mind of each one of them was the tragic realization that the village storekeeper had been due home from Pueblo on this stage. The stranger said he'd seen two dead. They knew that would be the driver and Mr. Winters unless something had occurred to hold Winters in the city another day.

They let their horses out in a fast gallop, pacing them carefully to make the utmost speed without riding them off their feet as the stranger had done with his. They knew the only spot a landslide was likely to occur was on the stretch of steep side-hill road on the other side of the low pass beyond the head of Powder Valley, and they were looking ahead for the spot and saw the break in the edge of the road when they were still two hundred yards distant.

Pat reined his horse down, panting. "That's it. Right yonder. Too steep to go over the edge there. We better turn down into the canyon here."

Sam and Ezra followed Pat in pulling his horse back on his haunches and turning him to plunge over the edge and down at the same point the murderous rider had chosen less than an hour earlier when he rode down to inspect the result of his careful planning.

The two broken-legged lead horses of the stage team, more

inextricably tangled in their harness than before, were still struggling to free themselves and neighing piteously as the three men rode up.

Pat saw their broken legs at once, and swung out of the saddle swearing grimly as he pulled his gun. His first act was to send a merciful bullet into the brain of each pain-crazed animal, and for a fleeting moment he wondered what sort of man the stranger could be when he neglected this act when he was there earlier.

But more grisly things claimed Pat's attention and thoughts at once. The coach lay on its side, the driver's seat and front portion smashed to kindling wood by the huge boulder which had also killed the wheel team instantly.

The body of Taw Drummond was in that smashed wreckage, flattened to an indistinguishable pancake of flesh and blood and shattered bones, and a few feet beyond the coach lay the body of Mr. Winters where he had evidently been tossed clear, his face and head smashed to a bloody pulp so it was difficult to recognize him.

The three men, indescribably shocked by the death of their good friend, gathered around Winters' body and Pat shook his head sadly, muttering, "I don't see how he got smashed up that way. The back of the coach ain't smashed at all, an' it looks like he was flung out while it was turning over an' over coming downhill."

"If he wasn't settin' up with Taw on the driver's seat like he usually did," Sam Sloan put in.

Pat shook his head, frowning angrily. "He'd be plumb crushed to death like Taw if he'd been sitting up beside him. You can see where that rock, 'most as big as a house, loosened from up above an' dropped right square down on top of the front part."

Ezra was kneeling beside Winters, feeling carefully over his limp body. He looked up with his one eye glaring redly and suspiciously filmed with moisture. "He's got a couple of busted ribs but I can't find nothin' else wrong." He sighed deeply and rocked back on his heels, reached for a bandana which he clumsily spread over the face of their friend.

Pat went to the coach and leaned in through the opening where one of the side doors had been wrenched from its hinges, and studied the interior with growing puzzlement. "I don't see a mite of blood inside here," he reported. "Here's some papers on the floor that fell out of Winters' pockets so he must of been riding back here by himself when it happened. He must of hit his face against a rock when he was thrown out."

"Mighty funny there ain't no rock around here with blood on it," Ezra grumbled. He was down on his knees circling the body, searching the ground as though he were trying to smell out evidence.

Pat and Sam stepped back and watched him hopefully. They knew and respected the peculiar sixth sense which seemed to come to Ezra's aid at a time like this. He had a way of locating a single dislodged pebble and building a complete set of facts from a tiny scratch on its surface and the position in which he found it, and they waited breathlessly to hear his verdict.

In the meantime, other riders were arriving from Dutch Springs, some of them stopping at the edge of the broken roadway above, and others riding down into the canyon.

Pat and Sam moved back to meet these latter ones and to hold them back from the scene and prevent them from milling around and messing up the ground signs more than had already been done.

To these late-comers, Pat simply explained that the accident had killed both the driver and his single passenger, and that Ezra was merely checking up on the scene for an official report that he would have to make to the insurance company.

He didn't mention aloud the thought that was growing stronger in his mind as he watched Ezra quarter back and forth over the ground on his haunches; the suspicion that it might not be an accident at all, but planned murder.

But he couldn't help thinking: *First Bill Freeman and now Mr. Winters*. Winters was the only person in the Valley who had known who the real William Wilcox was. He couldn't help thinking what a shock it was going to be to the brave

girl back in the Jewel Hotel; yes, and what a *relief* it was going to be to Dick Freeman to know there was now no further danger that Winters would uphold the legality of the girl's claim.

Ezra had finished now, and was coming toward him. Pat stepped forward quickly to meet him and draw him back beyond earshot of the curious men whom he and Sam had been holding back. "What do you make of it?" he demanded anxiously.

"Not much . . . yet," grunted Ezra. "I still don't see how Winters could of got killed like that an' no rocks around where he could of hit. There's bin one man here before us," he went on. "Mebby two men on hawses. It's hard tuh say on account of thuh way we rode in an' scattered tracks before I started lookin'. But there's bin one man on foot before us movin' around where Winters lays," he went on positively.

"Sure," Pat reminded him. "The man that brought word to us. He said he rode down here for a look-see."

"Yeh. I reckon he might of got off to see was Winters plumb dead," Ezra conceded. He glanced up the slope frowningly at the group of riders excitedly gathered on the road above, and beyond them to the edge of the overhanging cliff from which the huge boulder had been dislodged.

"I got a mind to ride up yonder to the top an' take a look-around before *it* gets messed up," he announced. "Some-thin' mighty danged funny about this hull thing, Pat. I cain't get it outta my mind that Winters was . . ."

Pat nodded and said quietly, "I know. He was the only man in the Valley that knew whether Bill Freeman was named Wilcox or not. Go ahead on up there, Ezra. Sam an' me'll stay here and see to takin' care of things. We'll ride up soon as I get a couple of stretchers fixed to take Taw and Winters out on."

10.

BY CUTTING AND TRIMMING the branches from four slender saplings, and spreading a saddle blanket across each pair, two rude litters were put together to carry the corpses of Taw Drummond and Mr. Winters up the steep slope to the road where they could be loaded into a carriage driven from Dutch Springs to pick them up.

Pat Stevens and Sam Sloan supervised the job; and then saw to the removal of the harness from the bodies of the four dead horses, and to the salvaging of the mail sacks and express parcels from the wrecked stage which also had to be taken into Dutch Springs for shipment on southward.

With this work accomplished, Pat and Sam went up to the broken spot in the roadway above to view the damage wrought when the side of the road had caved away under the weight of the dropping boulder. Fortunately, the road had been more than ten feet wide at that point, and there was enough solid roadway left next to the bank for vehicles to pass the spot without immediate repairs.

It was past sundown by the time these necessary tasks were completed, and Ezra had not returned from his investigation of the direct cause of the tragedy above them. The funeral carriage had already started back to Dutch Springs with its melancholy load, and the riders were beginning to disperse back toward town or off to their neighboring ranches.

Thus far, no one except Pat and his two companions had noticed anything at all irregular about the supposed accident,

and not the slightest suspicion had been voiced as to the cause of the tragedy. Desiring to keep all such suspicions allayed for the time being at least, Pat and Sam hung back and urged all the others to ride on before they put their horses up the steep slope to the top of the cliff where Ezra patiently awaited them.

They found the big, one-eyed man squatted back from the edge placidly smoking a cigarette, and as soon as they rode up and Pat saw the pleased expression on Ezra's scarred face he knew his partner had struck pay-dirt in his investigation.

He swung out of his saddle with a sigh and squatted beside Ezra, began to build a cigarette and said, "Let's have it."

Ezra waited until Sam was settled on the other side of him before saying angrily, "'Twas murder, right enuff. The front part of the cliff where the rock fell from shows signs of bein' dug away with a pick. Not fresh signs, mind yuh, an' not much. Looks like it was done a day or so ago, mebbby, an' the rock was left sorta balanced till somebody wanted it tuh fall."

Pat sucked on his cigarette and said grimly, "Go on."

"A rider was up here this afternoon. One man on a hawse. There's a set of tracks comin' up from off thuh road, an' another set leadin' down again. Cain't tell where he went after he hit the road 'cause there was too many new tracks messin' it up before I got to it." Ezra turned his single, red-rimmed eye accusingly on the sheriff to indicate his official laxity in allowing this to happen.

"When we first got here," Pat said shortly, "we didn't have no thought that tracks or anything was goin' to be important." He got up from his squatting position and strolled over to the edge to study the spot from which the boulder had fallen. He shook his head and complained, "Maybe a little bit in front was dug away, but you can see here where the rock rested an' I'd say it'd take at least a dozen men to push it over the edge. Unless they put a pryboard under it from behind to help it along."

Ezra shook his head placidly. "There wasn't no pryboard used. That woulda left marks behind, an' yore killer was too

smart for that. 'Twould of took about a dozen men pushin' on it though, jest like you say."

"Then how in tarnation do you reckon he managed it?"

Ezra chuckled placidly. "A good ropin' hawse kin pull as much as a dozen men. You know that."

"Sure, I know a good hawse can pull a dozen men from the saddlehorn," Pat agreed hotly. "But that rock was balanced on the edge of the cliff. To get a rope-pull on it, the hawse would have to be out in front hangin' in the air. Maybe he had wings on his four feet to hold him up, huh?"

Ezra was unperturbed. "I said yore killer was smart. Take a look at thuh base of that tree leanin' out over the edge. There's rope burns around it. He passed his rope around that tree an' back here to where his hawse had solid ground to pull on. With his loop fastened to thuh rock, all he had tuh do was wait till the stage was right underneath an' then put on the pressure. Pulling around the tree, the rope jerked the rock forward and over the edge even if the hawse was here *behind* it."

Pat said, "I'll be plumb damned. Simple, but plenty smart." He came back to the other two, his gray eyes hot with anger. "You make anything else outta them tracks?"

Ezra shook his head. "Hawse was shod all the way around. But there's lotsa shod hawses in Powder Valley."

Pat squatted down beside the other two to build another cigarette. It was deep twilight now on top of the cliff. In the west, angry traces of daylight still lingered above the horizon, streaks of violet and crimson lighting the heavy cloud-banks gathering there.

"Bill Freeman and Mr. Winters both in two days," Pat said evenly. "Two of the best men in the Valley. I'd say this cinches it. If that rock was dug away yesterday or the day before like you say, it's a sure bet that whoever done it knew Winters was due on today's stage an' waited till Drummond drove underneath. Just to get Winters, I'd say."

"Ain't no doubt about that," Sam agreed from the other side of Ezra. "The mailbags an' express wasn't tampered with."

Whoever done it rode down after the stage went over an' found Winters throwed out on the ground not plumb dead. He fixed that by finishing him off with a rock while he was layin' there . . . then carried the rock off with him and hid it hopin' we'd jest think Winters hit his head rollin' down thuh slope."

"That's the way it's gotta be," Ezra agreed heavily. "Whoever done it was after Winters. The fallin' rock didn't get him, so he went down an' finished thuh job."

"Mr. Winters was like Bill Freeman," Pat said slowly. "Didn't have an enemy in the whole Valley. I reckon he was the best-liked an' most-trusted man hereabouts."

Both his partners nodded gloomy assent. Sam said, "I reckon there ain't a man in the Valley that ain't been beholden tuh Winters at one time or 'nother. He's carried all of us on his books for chuck when we was hard up, and he never dunned no man tuh pay his bill. We'll never get another storekeeper like him tuh carry us over hard times."

"It's got to be tied up with the Freeman killing," said Pat harshly. "Somebody is plumb dead-set that the Wilcox girl ain't going to be able to prove her claim to the Four-V's. Winters was the only man in the Valley that could prove her claim after Bill was murdered, an' now Winters can't do it."

"Who?" demanded Ezra angrily. "Dick Freeman's the only one that'll profit by keepin' her claim unproved. An' Dick Freeman has been locked up in jail for two days. He couldn't of done this job."

"Lucky for him he was locked up," Pat agreed. "He'd sure hang for this if he wasn't."

"Who does that leave you?" Sam demanded.

"I don't know. I sure don't know." Pat took a final drag on his cigarette and spun the butt away. "I hanker to have a little talk with that stranger that near killed his hawse bringin' in the news. Either one of you know who he is?"

Both men shook their heads. Both were certain they had never seen the rider before.

"I'd say he's up from Texas not too long ago," Ezra rum-

bled. "Talks like a Longhorned jasper, an' he's ridin' a double-rig saddle."

Pat nodded. "I noticed that, too. An' I can't help but remember that Bill Freeman hailed from Texas too."

"Would he of rode in with news of the stage if he was mixed up in it?" Sam asked doubtfully. "Seems like the guy that did it would of rode the other way an' tried tuh claim he wasn't nowhere near around."

"Maybe. And maybe not," Pat argued. "Feller like that gets too smart for his britches sometimes. Figures that's the best way of actin' innocent. And if anybody knew he was out on this road about the time it happened, he'd be afraid there'd be questions asked if he didn't report it."

"You got any other reason to pick him?" Sam asked.

"We know he rode down to the stage," Pat reminded him. "And we know the killer rode down there to finish off Winters."

"But we don't know whether one or two men was down there after it happened," Ezra put in. "I told you there mighta bin two hawses before us. But only one man got off to make foot-tracks."

"Right now I'm guessin' there was only one man down there," Pat said grimly. "Else, why did the Texas rannie go off and leave those two lead hawses alive like that with busted legs?"

Both men looked at him with puckered brows.

"What kind of man would do that?" Pat went on angrily. "First thing we thought of was to put them two hawses out of their misery with a bullet. But *he* didn't. He admits ridin' down there. But he wouldn't waste two bullets on those poor critters. *Why not?*"

"You got somethin' there," Sam agreed excitedly. "He was wearing a six-gun awright. And a belt-full of cartridges. I noticed particular because he carried it on thuh wrong side. I never saw a right-hand holster on the left side before."

"I did. Once," Pat said. "Back in Arizona when I was a kid. Tombstone Jake could pull a gun faster from a holster on the left in front like that than greased lightnin'. He'd

proved it seventeen times before a hawse throwed him an' broke his neck. Whatever else he is, that fellow's a killer," he went on flatly. "I figure the reason he didn't kill those two crippled hawses was the same reason he used a rock instead of his gun on Winters. He wanted it to look like an accident."

"But he could of used the rock on Winters an' still gunned the hawses without it bein' suspicious," Sam argued. "He could say Winters was dead when he got there, so he finished off the hawses before ridin' on."

"A man that's committed murder don't always think straight," Pat said. "He gets panicky an' he don't figure things out good."

"I've knowed some fellers that like tuh see animals suffer," said Ezra. "You kin tell 'em by thuh way they allus mistreat the hawses they ride. That kinda man woulda rode off an' left 'em laying there with their broken laigs."

"All the same," said Pat, "I'm going to do some checkin' up. I want to know when he left Hopewell Junction and whether he talked to anybody there." He got up and tugged his hat lower on his forehead. "You two had better ride back to Dutch Springs. Keep an eye on that rannie. Don't mess with him 'less he tries to make a break for it, *but don't let him leave town.*"

They separated, Pat riding back to Hopewell Junction, and Sam and Ezra heading together toward Dutch Springs.

News of the stagecoach tragedy had preceded Pat Stevens to Hopewell Junction when he reached the little railroad town a couple of hours later. He went directly to the livery stable behind the old frame hotel, left his horse with orders to have him fed immediately and be ready for the road again within an hour, and then went around to the front of the hotel.

He found a group of citizens inside the dingy lobby excitedly discussing the accident, and they descended on the Powder Valley sheriff with a lot of questions. He gave them an outline of the accident without mentioning the suspicious evidence he had unearthed with the help of Ezra, and then drew the proprietor of the hotel to one side.

Lafe Magnum was an old man with a white mustache and a bald head. He had run the Hopewell Junction Hotel for forty years and knew every rancher in the surrounding countryside by his first name.

"I haven't got much time, Lafe," Pat told him. "Got business back in Dutch Springs. But I need the answers to some questions first. Could you eat supper with me so I could eat an' get the answers at the same time?"

"You bet I can, Sheriff. Right in here." Lafe Magnum led him back to a small rear dining room with half a dozen tables covered with cheery red-and-white checked tablecloths. He selected a table by the window, somewhat removed from the others, and when one of his daughters bustled up, he told her, "Steak an' fixin's for both of us, 'Mira." When the girl went away he asked curiously, "What's on yore mind, Pat?"

"Strangers. You got any stopping here?"

Lafe shook his head. "I'm plumb sorry I ain't. Last one I had checked out about noon today."

"Who was he?"

"Name of Charley Dilson. Signed the register from Denver, but he didn't know much about the city when I talked to him. Texas, I'd say. Black shirt an' hat, and a funny way of wearing his shootin' iron."

Pat nodded. "How long was he here?"

"Four-five days. Lemme see now." Lafe contracted his brow in thought. His daughter brought two bowls of steaming soup to the table and went away.

"'Twas last Sunday that he rode up an' rented a room, I reckon. Yep. I know 'twas. 'Cause he asked 'bout trains from Denver an' I told him the next one wouldn't be in till the next mornin' . . . there not bein' any afternoon train on Sunday. That was the train them two from the East came in on. The purty gal and her friend. Right rich and stuck-up they was, I reckon. Kicked 'cause they couldn't get the stage to Dutch Springs till afternoon and rented a hotel room jest for the few hours they was here. Didn't even sleep in it either. Looked like a waste of good money but I didn't argy with 'em."

Pat waited until the garrulous old hotel proprietor ran down before asking, "This Charley Dilson? What'd he do while he was here?"

"Nothin' much. Rode out to look the country over on Monday afternoon. Said somethin' about maybe getting a job an' settling. Asked questions about all the ranches in the Valley and sech. Come back late on Monday night an' cut me off short when I asked did he find a job. Rode out again Tuesday afternoon but wasn't gone but three-four hours."

"What time did he pull out this afternoon?"

"Must of been right after dinner," the old man reflected. "He paid his bill an' said he'd be ridin' on. I dunno whether he said it outright, but I got the idee he was ridin' to Dutch Springs. Taw Drummond said he was down to the stage depot this mornin' talkin' to him about the road to Dutch Springs and all."

"Do you remember him ever asking any questions about Mr. Winters coming through here?" Pat asked sharply.

"Can't say that I recollect him doin' that. But I do recall he was settin' out in the lobby this mornin' when the telygram come from Winters askin' Taw to hold the stage if the train was late. Mr. Winters allus did that," Lafe went on to explain, "since that time two years ago when the train was thutty minutes late an' Taw pulled out without him . . . not knowin' he was due on it. Mr. Winters had to hire a rig at the livery stable on account of it an' he gave Taw Hail Columbia for not waitin' next time he saw him." Lafe chuckled at the recollection and tackled his soup.

Pat let him finish the bowl before asking, "Do you remember talking to Dilson about the telegram or about Mr. Winters?"

"Shucks, I might've," the old man admitted cheerfully. "You know how I am. Jest an old wind-bag, Jenny usta tell me. I like to talk 'bout this an' that when somebody's around."

"Sunday afternoon when Charley Dilson asked about the trains from Denver," said Pat slowly, "did he act like he expected somebody in on a train?"

"Can't say that he did, but I neither can't say that he didn't. Dunno why else he'd ask though. *He* wasn't takin' one. He come in ridin' a black hawse. Plenty spur-scarred and with a pair of ugly eyes. An outlaw if ever I saw one. His hawse, I mean. But I'd say he was jest as mean as his outlaw hawse an' knew how to handle him. Them Easterners was quite taken by him," Lafe went on with a chuckle. "Acted like they hadn't never seen a gun-toting jasper before. Got right thick with him durin' them few hours they was here waitin' for the stagecoach."

Pat Stevens stiffened at this item of information. He tried to keep his voice casual, to avoid showing Lafe he considered it important: "Do you think they might have known each other before they met here at your hotel?"

"If they did they was mighty careful not to show it," the proprietor assured him. "Dilson was here in the lobby when they come in from the train. That gal couldn't hardly take her eyes off him, but they didn't say nothin' to each other till after I called him over an' interdooced him to her. After that the three of 'em talked together most of the time till he rode off after dinner . . . saying he was goin' out to look for a job like I told you."

"Do you remember any of them asking you about Bill Freeman?"

"No, I sure don't. I reckon I might've told Dilson about the Four-V's spread when he was askin' about ranches hereabouts, but I couldn't say that he asked me."

The girl brought a pair of thick steaks and a big platter of fried potatoes. Lafe waited until she went away before asking in a cautious undertone, "Is somethin' wrong, Pat? I know Bill Freeman got murdered in his bed a couple of days ago. An' Mr. Winters died in that there stage accident this afternoon. How come you're askin' about both of them in connection with Dilson?"

"I don't know yet," Pat told him honestly. "Playing out a hunch right now." He shook his head soberly and attacked his steak. "Soon as I finish this I'll be ridin' back to Dutch Springs. Keep all these questions under your hat, Lafe."

11.

IT WAS A LITTLE before midnight when Pat Stevens rode his tired horse back into Dutch Springs. The only lights in the little village were at the Gold Eagle Saloon and up the street at the Jewel Hotel. He dismounted in front of the saloon, saw Ezra's and Sam's horses tied there along with a few others.

Ezra was at the bar with a group of men still discussing the afternoon's accident over a bottle of whiskey. Ezra's single eye gleamed redly as he turned it toward the sheriff, and his scarred face was flushed by the amount of liquor he had inside him.

"Hyar comes Pat Stevens now," he boomed to the others at the bar. He lurched forward unsteadily. "Whatcha bin doin', Pat?"

"I rode to Hopewell Junction to make a report to the stage company on the accident," Pat said curtly for the benefit of the listening men. "You're drunk as a fiddler's spotted dog, Ezra."

"Mebby so." The big man grinned happily and flung a heavy arm about Pat's shoulders. "But I ain't yet as drunk as a hootey owl. You kin see that plain as day fer yoreself."

Pat shrugged Ezra's arm off his shoulders and went up to the bar. He filled a glass from the bottle sitting there, and tossed it down, then turned to ask Ezra, "Where's Sam at?"

"Up to thuh hotel." Ezra closed his one eye in a slow wink that gave his face a look of cunning. "Makin' up to that purty gal from thuh East, I wouldn't be none s'prised. Wait'll Kitty

Sloan hears about that. She'll give ol' Sam what-for." He laughed drunkenly and reached for the bottle.

Pat shoved it back out of his reach. "You've had plenty for tonight," he told him shortly. "One more drink an' you'll be worse'n a hootey owl." He took him by the arm and led him toward the swinging doors firmly, saying, "Some outside air is what you need right now."

A snicker ran around the group of men behind them at the bar as they passed out into the night. Outside the door, Ezra jerked his arm from Pat's grip and told him in an offended tone, "I ain't as drunk as I was makin' out back yonder. I didn't wanta do no talkin' outta turn so I jest pertended like."

"What's Sam doing at the hotel?" Pat turned up the street in that direction.

"Makin' his stakeout on that Texas rannie like you tol' him to." Ezra lurched along unsteadily beside him. "Wasn't no need fer both of us tuh tuck him in bed was there?"

"So he put up at the hotel?" Pat mused. "Do any talking around town?"

"Not much, I reckon. Tol' some of thuh fellers he was ridin' south from Denver an' was sorta on thuh lookout fer a foreman's job if he could find one hereabouts." Ezra stumbled and clutched Pat's arm to steady himself, and hiccupped loudly. "You find out anything in Hopewell Junction?"

"Not much. Nothin' to talk about." Pat led him in through the front doors of the hotel where Sam Sloan was morosely slouched in a chair that gave him a clear view of the stairway leading up to the hotel rooms on the upper floor.

Sam grinned when he saw Ezra's condition. "Drunk as a hootey owl, by God."

"I ain't neither. Not by four drinks." Ezra hiccupped happily and lumbered over to collapse in a chair.

There was no one else in the small front room of the hotel. Pat asked Sam, "Is Dilson upstairs?"

"That's right." They both disregarded Ezra. "Room forty-two. Charley Dilson from Denver, he signed the hotel register. Had supper an' a few drinks an' went up to his room

'bout an hour ago. I bin settin' here ever since watchin' the stairs like a houn' dawg with a treed coon."

Pat nodded his satisfaction. "You better take Ezra out home with you and put him to bed there. Sally an' Kitty'll be worried about us, and wanting to know about the stage accident."

Sam stood up and stretched. "Ain't you comin'?"

Pat shook his head. "Not tonight. I'm stickin' around to have a talk with Charley Dilson. And I'm plumb int'rested to know how Miss Wilcox and her fiancy feel about things now that Winters is dead."

"I reckon they feel mighty bad about it. I seen 'em at supper an' they looked plumb whipped. They were countin' on him tuh prove her claim to tuh Four-V's."

Pat nodded casually. "Tell Sally how things're shaping up an' that I'll be home soon as things get cleared up a little. You better ride back in the morning and we'll see where we stand."

Sam went over and shook Ezra who was leaning back in the chair with his one eye closed and his big mouth open. Pat stood and watched the two men go out together. He thought of something and followed them to the door, called to them as they moved down the street, "Put my hawse up in the livery stable for me, Sam."

"Shore will," Sam called over his shoulder, and Pat went back to the hotel desk to turn the register about and see which of the upstairs rooms were vacant.

He saw that Miss Joan Wilcox was in No. 36; and Mr. Paul Munson was assigned No. 39 across the hall from her. No. 41 was also taken, but 43 was vacant. Pat scrawled his name on the register, went behind the desk to get the key of No. 43, and climbed the stairs.

Only one of the double row of rooms lining the upper hallway showed a light behind the closed door. That was No. 36, Miss Joan Wilcox's room.

Pat went quietly down the hall past 36 and heard the subdued murmur of voices inside. He kept going on to his room, unlocked the door and struck a match as he entered.

He went across to a rickety dresser and took the globe from a kerosene lamp, put flame to the wick and set the globe back on. He turned the wick low, and then pulled off his hat and leather jacket and tossed them on the bed behind him. He hesitated a moment, then squared his shoulders and went out.

He crossed the hall to No. 42 and knocked on the closed door. He got no answer, and knocked a second time before trying the door. The knob turned and the door opened. He struck a match and peered inside, saw the room was empty and the bed still neatly made up.

Scowling, he pulled the door shut and moved along the hall to No. 36. The sound of voices inside the lighted room died suddenly as he knocked on the door. There was a short moment of silence before he heard someone coming toward the door. He dropped his hand to the butt of his holstered gun and loosened it in its leather.

The door opened a crack and Paul Munson looked out at him. He was coatless, wearing a white shirt and stiff collar and black bow tie. His face was flushed and angry-looking. Through the partially open door he demanded harshly, "Yes? What is it?"

Pat said, "I thought this was Miss Wilcox's room. I'd like to see her a minute."

Munson turned his head and said, "It's the sheriff." He turned back to expostulate, "It's late. I don't think Miss Wilcox wants to be bothered."

Pat said, "She's going to be whether she likes it or not." He leaned his shoulder against the door and pushed.

For a moment Paul Munson resisted the pressure. Then he stepped back out of the way with an angry imprecation. The door flew open and Pat saw Joan Wilcox seated on the edge of her bed staring at him with wide eyes. She wore a frilly shirtwaist that made her look small and childlike, and her hair was down in two long braids. She looked frightened, and her big eyes were inflamed from weeping.

Beyond her, Charley Dilson rose slowly from a chair tipped back against the wall. He had removed his chaps and

black hat, but otherwise was dressed as Pat had first seen him. The thumb of his right hand was hooked inside his gun-belt inches away from the black butt of his six-gun, and his dark eyes held a saturnine gleam. He looked to be in his mid-forties, with heavy shoulders and a beaked nose, thick lips and an aggressive jaw. He said, "So yo're the Powder Valley sheriff, huh? Folks in these parts say yo're purty tough."

"Plenty tough to handle a fancy gun-slinger like you." Pat's gun was half-drawn and his gray eyes bored into Dilson's. "I'll take that shootin' iron of yours right now." He pushed past Munson, disregarding the terrified girl seated on the bed, and advanced slowly with his left hand outthrust.

Charley Dilson hesitated. The fingers of his right hand curled and jerked nervously. Then he gave a short laugh and said, "Yo're mighty brave when you walk in with the draw on a man."

"I wouldn't want any shootin' to scare Miss Wilcox," Pat said coldly. "Hand it over, butt first."

Dilson drew his gun slowly. He flipped it in the air and caught hold of it by the muzzle, handed it over to Pat with an ironic smile. "Is it ag'in the law tuh wear iron in Powder Valley?"

Pat stepped back with Dilson's .45 dangling from the fingers of his left hand. "Nope," he said noncommittally. "You'll get it back when I'm done talkin'." He moved back toward the door and sat down in a straight chair. "This here is right cozy. How long have you-all knowed each other?"

"What's that to you?" blustered Munson, stepping forward to seat himself on the bed by Joan's side.

"Just wondered," said Pat mildly. "Thought you might've met up in Denver."

There was a brief moment of silence. Dilson reseated himself and folded his arms across his chest.

"Miss Wilcox and I met Dilson in Hopewell Junction," said Munson stiffly. "Why do you think it was Denver?"

"You came through Denver on your way down, didn't you?"

"Of course we did. But we just stopped over between trains. What's the meaning of this intrusion, Sheriff?"

Pat disregarded his angry question. He asked Dilson, "How long since you left Texas?"

"Three months, if it's any of yore bizniss."

Pat nodded and sighed. "Ever hear of a man named William Wilcox in Texas?"

The big man shook his head, his thick lips curling into a sneer. "Texas is a big state."

Pat said, "So it is. I'm wonderin' what you did Monday afternoon when you rode out from Hopewell Junction."

Dilson blinked in surprise at the unexpectedness of the question. The two Easterners were sitting erect side by side, looking from one to the other of the two men with dismayed and worried expressions.

"I was sorta sashayin' around for a job on one of thuh ranches," Dilson said easily.

"Ride up the road toward Dutch Springs?"

Dilson shook his head. "Ranches are all back off the road. I stopped by the Square D spread for supper if you wanta check up."

Pat said, "I will." He shifted his attention to Munson and Joan. "What've you two got to talk to Dilson about?"

"They bin offering me the job of foreman on a spread here in thuh Valley," Dilson spoke up for them. "They want somebody they kin trust tuh go out an' take charge before some guy named Clay Porter has a chance tuh wrangle all the beef stuff off their range."

"Still figure to lay claim to the Four-V's?" Pat asked interestedly, not looking at Dilson.

"Why not?" asked Munson hotly. "Didn't you as much as admit yourself that Freeman must have been Joan's father?"

"I don't recollect that I did," Pat denied lazily.

"You and your deputy both recognized that picture of Mr. Wilcox."

"We said it looked like it might be Bill Freeman," Pat protested. "That wouldn't stand up in no court of law. With

Mr. Winters dead, I sure don't know how you'll make a legal claim."

"I'll see about that," Munson said. "I don't know your Colorado laws, but I was an attorney back home and I intend to see to my fiancée's legal rights. That's why I accompanied her West . . . to see to it that you people out here treated her fairly."

"I don't blame you none for feelin' that way," Pat agreed reasonably. "But I don't know what you're going to use for proof now that Mr. Winters can't testify."

"I'll worry about that," Munson blustered. "I intend to file a claim on the estate tomorrow and ask that a trustee be appointed by the court to see that the assets are not dissipated while the merits of Joan's claim are investigated."

"Are you thinkin' of havin' this here Charley Dilson appointed trustee?" Pat asked with interest.

Munson shrugged. "It might be a good choice. He's a completely disinterested party, and a competent cowman I imagine."

"Meanin' you figure nobody in the Valley would be fair about somethin' like that?"

"None of you in the Valley could call yourselves completely disinterested," Munson charged. "You have to admit there's a conspiracy here to prevent Joan from proving her claim. First, her father was murdered before she was allowed to see him, and this afternoon a very ingenious accident resulted in the death of her only other witness. Are you going to tell me you don't suspect Mr. Winters' death was part of a plot to keep the ranch from her?"

"Are you sayin' it wasn't an accident?"

"I'm not saying anything except that it's mighty queer the way both deaths came at just the right time to prevent Joan from establishing her claim to the ranch."

Pat nodded. "I don't blame you for thinkin' it's funny." He turned to Dilon. "I want to know where you were on the road when the stage passed you this afternoon?"

"I told you I was about three or four miles from where it went over the side of thuh cliff."

"That would have been about four o'clock," Pat surmised mildly.

"About that, I reckon."

"How fast were you ridin'?"

Dilson shrugged. "I was takin' it along at a jog-trot."

"Take you about an hour to get there after leavin' Hope-well Junction?"

"Something like that, I reckon."

"But you left the Junction right after dinner." Pat's voice suddenly became harsh. "What were you doin' all that time along the road?"

Dilson looked confused, and then he became enraged. His eyes narrowed to slits and unconsciously he dropped his hand down to his waist beside the empty holster on his belt.

Pat shook his head and lifted the .45 in his left hand. "No need to reach for a gun," he reminded the Texan.

Dilson glowered at him and then slowly relaxed. "My hawse picked up a stone, now that you mention it. I'd plumb forgot. I dug it out an' rested him an hour in the shade of a tree before ridin' on."

"Did you get off your hawse down by the stagecoach?" Pat demanded.

"No. I just rode down for a quick look-see. It was easy enough tuh tell they was both dead without getting off."

"How come you rode off leavin' the two lead hawses with busted legs an' tangled up in the harness?"

Dilson looked honestly bewildered. "Why not?" he protested. "I figured I oughtta get help. You wouldn't think I'd take time tuh untangle 'em from the harness, would you?"

Pat stood up. He said with flat finality, "Any man that'd ride off an' leave two hawses screaming in pain like that is either a two-legged skunk or had a hell of a good reason for doin' it. Take your own pick." He dropped Dilson's gun on the floor, turned his back on the trio and strode out of the hotel room.

Back in his own room with the door shut, he went to the window and pulled it open, built himself a cigarette and sighed, looking out into the night.

He didn't think he had handled the situation in Miss Wilcox's room very well. There was something about the situation that he didn't understand. He had felt undercurrents in the room that he couldn't quite put his finger on. It seemed like the two Easterners were mighty thick with Dilson to've just met him for a short time by accident in Hopewell Junction, yet it was difficult to see how they could possibly be mixed up in either death.

Joan Wilcox and Paul Munson were the last persons in the world to have desired the death of either Bill Freeman or Mr. Winters. Yet he had a hunch that Dilson wasn't just the innocent wandering jasper that he pretended to be. If he had had a hand in either death (as Pat more than half suspected) why were the Eastern couple so friendly with him?

Pat couldn't figure it out. He wasn't used to mysteries like this. Powder Valley had had its fair share of killings in the past, but they had always been straightforward affairs that a man could dig into without much trouble. There wasn't anything for a man to get his teeth into this time. A lot of guesses and a lot of unanswered questions, and no discernible motive for anyone except Dick Freeman, and he'd been safely locked in jail this afternoon when someone was toppling a boulder down on the stagecoach.

Pat finished his cigarette and ground it out in a saucer on top of the dresser beside the lamp, took off his gunbelt and boots and crawled into bed. Right now it was a whole lot too much for him.

12.

PAT STEVENS GOT UP early the next morning. He ate a leisurely breakfast downstairs in the hotel dining room and then set out for the courthouse. He was headed for the office of District Judge Archibald Bemis who had been appointed to the position after the vulturous Judge J. Worthington Prink had been ridden out of town on a rail almost two years previously.

Although Judge Bemis did not have the legal background and experience of his predecessor in office, he had proven himself a happy choice for the position. He was a scholarly man who had once been editor of a Chicago paper before coming West for reasons of bad health, and he was honest and kindly and patient. With the aid of a couple of lawbooks which he consulted on rare occasions, he had shown himself to be an impartial and just arbiter of disputes among the residents of the Valley.

With a strong personal conviction that justice was a matter of common sense and logic rather than of long-winded and unintelligible decisions handed down by other judges throughout the years and throughout the world, Judge Archibald Bemis had a way of summoning two disputants into the quiet of his office and listening to their conflicting stories with patience and forbearance. It was his settled conviction that most legal disputes arise out of misunderstandings, and that ninety-nine per cent of such cases could be settled amicably out of court if the litigants could be persuaded to sit down

across a table from each other and agree to a calm presentation of the facts. Generally, a satisfactory compromise could be found, and Judge Bemis always found it.

He was a tall, silvery-haired gentleman, with ascetic features and a gentle smile, and soft brown eyes that expressed his benevolent belief in the essential goodness of his fellow men. He was already in his office this morning when Pat Stevens entered, and he stood up to greet the sheriff with a courteous smile.

"Come in, Pat. Come in. You look worried this morning."

"I am worried, Judge," Pat admitted. He flung his hat aside and sank into a chair across from the judge. "I need some of your brand of advice."

"I'll be only too glad to help any way I can, Pat."

"Here's the way it is, Judge." Pat leaned forward and carefully told him the entire story, starting with the entrance of Miss Joan Wilcox and Mr. Paul Munson into his office on Monday afternoon, and ending with an account of his interview with the trio in Miss Wilcox's hotel room the preceding night.

"... an' that's all of it," he ended after a full explanation to which the judge had listened without a single interruption. "I want to know where I stand. This Munson claims he's a lawyer and that he's going to get a court order appointing that Texas gun-hand to take charge of the Four-V's ranch while he's tryin' to prove Miss Wilcox's claim to it. What I want to know is: how much claim has she got, and can he get a court order like that. I'm afraid there'll be trouble if he does," Pat went on swiftly. "You know Clay Porter. He ain't the kind to turn over Bill Freeman's ranch to a stranger without a fight."

Judge Bemis nodded gravely. "Porter wouldn't like that," he agreed. "This picture the girl has in her possession . . . You say you and Sam Sloan recognized Bill Freeman from it?"

"I didn't say that. It *could* be a picture of Bill. And there's them other things that fit her story." He ticked off the points on his fingers. "We know Bill come from Texas originally. He landed here ten years ago. He calls his brand the Four-

V's, but it could just as easy be a pair of W's . . . for the initials of William Wilcox. An' there's his name: Bill Freeman. Bill for William, and Freeman for free man . . . which could be he felt like a free man again after gettin' away from a wife and a life he didn't like."

"Those are points to be considered, but hardly legal proof," the judge commented. He leaned back and pressed the tips of his fingers together thoughtfully. "It appears to me that the crux of this situation is proof that Bill Freeman's real name was Wilcox. It appears that the girl came here in good faith, looking for her father who wrote her mother a letter ten years ago advising her that he was settling in the Valley under an assumed name. In other words, Pat, I judge we can accept that fact as true: that there is a rancher in the Valley who was once named William Wilcox, this girl's father. With Bill Freeman and Mr. Winters both dead and unable to testify, it becomes a matter of proving that Freeman, among all the ranchers in the Valley, is that man."

Pat nodded unhappily. "If there was any proof of that among Bill's papers in his desk, it's gone now."

"Another point to consider," Judge Bemis agreed. "Why did Freeman's murderer ransack his desk unless he was looking for some such proof to destroy it?"

"It's the same thing as asking why was he murdered," Pat agreed. "Only reason I can see is because someone knew he was William Wilcox and wanted to keep it quiet. Same way with Winters' murder. Why else was he killed except to keep him from sayin' Bill was the man the girl is looking for?"

"Exactly. Two more facts pointing to Bill Freeman as the man. A little too much to be mere coincidence, it seems to me."

"Then you think all of it put together is enough to prove the girl's claim?" Pat asked eagerly.

"I didn't say that. There's the question of the adopted son, also. And the possibility that Freeman left a will behind him. If he did have a daughter, it's reasonable to presume he would have wished to leave at least a portion of his estate to her. Did you not find any will in his desk, Pat?"

Pat shook his head dispiritedly. "Nary a sign of one." He hesitated, wrinkling his brow in deep thought. "Suppose there wasn't any will, and suppose the girl can prove he *was* her father? Would she get all the ranch? Or would Dick get part of it?"

"I don't know," said Judge Bemis honestly. "I believe different states have different laws governing such points. I can look up the Colorado Statute on it if it becomes necessary. Offhand, I'd say they would inherit equally in the absence of a will. If there is no will and the girl *fails* to prove her claim, I'm quite positive Dick would inherit just the same as though he were a natural son."

"If he don't hang on a charge of murder," Pat muttered.

"Precisely. One of the basic tenets of common law is that no person shall be allowed to profit by the commission of a crime. If Dick is adjudged guilty of his foster-father's death he can claim no portion of the estate. *Is* Dick guilty?" the judge added.

"I don't know," Pat told him honestly. "Near as I can see, he's the only one that had any reason to want Bill Freeman dead. On the other hand, if Winters was killed for the same reason, there *must* be someone else because Dick was locked up and couldn't of done that one too."

Judge Bemis nodded reflectively. "You can't possibly convict Dick with no more proof than you now have."

"I know that. I don't want to convict him without more proof." Pat sagged back in his chair and began to roll a cigarette. "This is one of them times I sure wish somebody else was wearin' this sheriff's star," he muttered disconsolately.

There was a perfunctory knock at the door, and Paul Munson pushed it open. Joan Wilcox was by his side, and Charley Dilson was right behind them.

"Judge Bemis?" Munson asked, glancing around the small austere office with a frown.

The judge nodded and stood up, said cordially, "Come right in and find some chairs."

Pat got up also, and introduced the Eastern couple to the

judge. "An' this here is Charley Dilson that I was telling you about," he added.

The judge shook hands with each one of them in turn. "This must have been a great shock to you, my dear," he told Miss Wilcox benignly. "To have the man you believe to be your father murdered on the very eve of your arrival."

The girl's eyes filled with tears and she sobbed, "It's been terrible. If I could just have seen him once before he died. To let him know that I cared. That I loved him and it was Mother's fault that I'd stayed away so long."

The judge sighed and patted her shoulder. "I have a feeling that he *does* know, my dear. I cannot believe that those who pass on lose all contact with those who stay behind." He drew a chair up for the weeping girl and seated her, then looked inquiringly at Munson:

"I've come here this morning to demand Miss Wilcox's rights as the sole heir to her father's estate," Munson said.

The judge reseated himself and lifted his white eyebrows. "On what proof do you base that statement?"

"Hasn't the sheriff told you? About the picture she has of her father taken with her mother and herself more than ten years ago?"

The judge said mildly, "He told me about the picture. I'd like to see it."

Munson hesitated momentarily, and then got it out of his pocket. The judge studied it for a time and nodded. "The resemblance to Bill Freeman is quite marked, though certainly not conclusive." He tapped it on the table in front of him and asked hopefully, "Have you no further proof? The letter written to Mrs. Wilcox for instance?"

"Mother destroyed that letter after she read it," Joan told him bitterly. "She hated father and was determined I should never see him again. Wouldn't it be proof," she went on eagerly, "if you could find an identical copy of that same picture among Mr. Freeman's things? He had one just like it when he went away. I remember mother telling me about having two copies printed at the same time. I don't think he would have thrown it away," she added timidly.

The judge looked over at Pat Stevens. Pat shook his head and said, "There wasn't any picture like that in his desk when I looked the next mornin' after his murder."

"Of course not," said Munson angrily. "It's common gossip around town that the murderer broke into the desk and went through all his papers. Naturally, he removed the picture that would prove Freeman was really William Wilcox."

"Wouldn't it be enough," Joan asked the judge hopefully, "if we could find someone who had seen the picture in his possession sometime before he died?"

"That would be fairly conclusive evidence," Judge Bemis agreed. "If that person could swear this picture of yours is identical with one Bill Freeman had. Do you know anyone who can do that?" he added in a kindly tone.

"N-no. But of course we don't know any of father's friends here in the Valley. I thought perhaps someone would remember seeing it if inquiries were made."

"A very logical hope," Judge Bemis approved. "I will institute such an inquiry at once."

"In the meantime," said Munson, "I presume you are forced to admit there is at least enough evidence to raise a legal question as to the disposition of Freeman's estate."

"I certainly do admit that," said Judge Bemis tranquilly.

"In that case, I wish to make a formal request that the court appoint an administrator to take charge of the estate and keep the assets intact until an ultimate decision is reached."

Judge Bemis' eyes twinkled at the bombastic terms in which Munson's request was phrased. He leaned back and said, "I don't know but what Clay Porter can hold the ranch together all right. He's been Bill Freeman's foreman for a good many years and has handled the ranch right well I guess."

"The present foreman may be perfectly competent," Munson said stiffly. "But I don't believe there's the slightest doubt that he resents the idea of Miss Wilcox eventually claiming the ranch."

"It would be natural for him to feel that way," the judge agreed.

"Then what's to prevent him from selling off the cattle and pocketing the money or passing it over to the adopted son?" Munson demanded excitedly. "It's up to the court to accept jurisdiction in a case like this."

"I don't believe Clay would do anything like that," the judge said easily. "Do you think so, Pat?"

"Clay's got a good square reputation," Pat told him.

"I contend that the sheriff's opinion in this matter is wholly irrelevant. I make a formal demand that an unbiased administrator be appointed at once."

Judge Bemis looked baffled. "Nothing like this has ever come up in my court before," he admitted. "I don't know just what the law might be."

The young Easterner looked aghast. "You don't know what the *law* is?" he choked.

The judge chuckled and admitted readily, "There's lots of things I don't know about the law, son. I generally try to do what seems to be right and just without worrying too much over legal precedents."

"But you're the District Judge, aren't you? Where else can a complainant go to obtain legal redress?"

"I'm the only judge in Powder Valley," Judge Bemis agreed. "Folks generally get a square deal in my court."

"Don't you admit the justice of my demand?"

"I don't know as I do. Clay wouldn't like it much if I were to appoint someone to take charge of the Four-V's over his head. No sir, I'm afraid he'd be pretty much put out."

"What on earth have his personal feelings to do with a legal matter like this?" Munson demanded.

"Personal feelings are mighty important in a place like Powder Valley," the judge assured him. He turned to Pat. "What do you think about all this?"

"I can see the way these people from the East feel about it," said Pat honestly. "They don't know Clay Porter like we do, and I reckon he *could* sell off the Four-V's stuff if he was a mind to."

"Everyone in town knows he's on friendly terms with Dick Freeman," Munson said excitedly. "In fact, I've heard some

talk that maybe he helped the boy get rid of Freeman to prevent him from seeing his daughter and legalizing her claim to the ranch."

"Some people," said the judge severely, "talk too much without heeding what they say. If I do appoint an administrator as you ask, whom do you suggest for the job?"

"Mr. Dilson," said Munson promptly. "He would be most satisfactory to my client. He's a complete stranger in these parts and therefore completely unbiased, and I'm sure his qualifications fit him to handle the assignment competently."

Judge Bemis looked across the room at the big Texan who sat with his chair tilted against the wall, listening to the discussion with a sardonic grin.

"How fast are you," the judge asked interestedly, "with that gun you carry twisted around on the wrong side?"

Charley Dilson's sardonic grin broadened. "Plenty fast."

"What has that to do with his qualifications to manage a ranch?" Munson demanded.

"It has a lot to do with this particular job," Judge Bemis assured him with a glance in Pat's direction. "Don't you agree with me, Sheriff?"

"I sure do. Clay Porter isn't any slouch with a six-gun. And it's a cinch this hombre would have to be faster than Clay if he wants the job."

Paul Munson listened to this exchange of views with growing amazement. "What has Porter to do with the selection of a successor?" he asked. "That's strictly up to the court."

"Clay would have plenty to say if I was to send this fancy gunned stranger out to take charge over his head. He'd never take a thing like that lying down."

"Good heavens," ejaculated Munson. "Have you folks no respect for the law? He could be arrested if he attempted to resist a court order."

"I wouldn't want to put that job off on Pat," the judge demurred. "Somebody would surely get hurt. We try to handle things to keep peace in Powder Valley." He turned to Pat and said casually, "Sam Sloan isn't very busy these days, is he?"

"Just sittin' on his tail out at the Lazy Mare waiting to get settled on a place of his own," Pat said promptly. "Jumpy as a brood hen because he hasn't got anything to keep him busy."

"You can tell him he's appointed," said the judge casually. "Clay won't take it so hard that way."

"You can't do things this way." Paul Munson was completely horrified by these informal proceedings. "I haven't even filed a formal request for an administrator yet. Such an appointment will have no legality."

"It'll be legal enough until this thing gets settled," the judge assured him with a smile. "Maybe we don't know much about the law in Powder Valley, but we manage to make out. Tell Sam he'd better make a count of the stuff as soon as he can get around to it, Pat."

Pat nodded and got up with a grin at the glowering face of Charley Dilon. He promised the judge, "I'll get started on it right away." He started out, then paused and turned back. "I'd like to take that picture, Judge. I'll be showing it around to see if anybody ever saw Bill Freeman have one like it."

"A very good idea," the judge approved, handing over the picture of Mr. and Mrs. William Wilcox and small daughter.

"You can't do that!" Munson exclaimed. "That's vital evidence to support Miss Wilcox's claim against her father's estate. How do we know the sheriff won't destroy it as soon as he gets out of our sight?"

Pat turned toward the young man slowly with an angry gleam lighting his gray eyes.

"Stand up on yore hind legs," he drawled, "an' say that over again."

"You're armed," Munson protested with a flush. "I can't go up against a gun with my bare fists."

For answer, Pat removed his gun and laid it on the table in front of the judge. "I'm plumb tired," he announced, "of listenin' to you spout off yore mouth about everybody in Powder Valley bein' crooked. Stand up so I can knock that kind of talk back down yore throat."

Paul Munson came up out of his chair with a snort of rage

and swinging fists. Pat hit him on the point of the chin, and stepped in coolly as he reeled backward, drove his other fist against the young man's mouth.

Paul Munson went backward and down to the floor unconscious.

Joan Wilcox jumped up and cried out, "You brute! You great big brute," and ran over to kneel down by her crumpled fiancé. Pat smiled grimly and picked up his gun. He holstered it and turned to look at Dilson who hadn't made any move to get up.

"You want any of this?" the Powder Valley sheriff demanded angrily.

Dilson shook his head. The smile lingered on his thick lips. "I ain't drawn cards yet," he murmured. "When I do, I'll be shore tuh let you know."

Pat nodded shortly, turned and stalked out of the District Judge's office.

13.

"YOU'VE BEEN WANTIN' SOMETHING to keep you busy till you can move onto the Hazeltine place," Pat reminded Sam Sloan sometime later in his office behind the jail.

"Shore enuff," Sam agreed morosely. "But I don't cotton tuh this idee too much. You an' Jedge Bemis sorta ganged up on me." He stood by the window with his back turned to Pat, looking out moodily while he rolled a cigarette.

"You're the best one for the job," Pat assured him mildly. "Judge Bemis and I both figured you were the one to do it."

"It's still a slap in thuh face for Clay Porter," Sam argued, "no matter who goes out there tuh take charge of the Four-V's. It's as good as sayin' to him, 'Look here, Clay, we don't trust you to run things now that Bill Freeman's dead. We think yo're crooked an' are liable to sell off the Four-V's cattle an' stick the money in yore own pocket.' Hell," he added uncomfortably, "think how I'd feel if I was foreman on the Lazy Mare an' you died . . . if the Jedge was to appoint someone over my head to come in an' run the ranch on account of I couldn't be trusted."

"The judge trusts Porter all right," Pat told him soothingly. "We'll explain that to Clay when we go out. This girl from the East sort of cornered the judge. You can't blame her too much. It looks to her like everybody here is against her. With Bill Freeman an' Winters both getting killed before they can speak up for her. She feels like she's got to protect her rights while her claim is bein' settled."

"I don't blame her none," Sam admitted. "But I don't hanker tuh be thuh goat. I wouldn't blame Clay none if he started shootin' when I tell him I'm takin' over."

"I'll ride out with you and explain things to Clay. He won't like it, but it's the law and he can't get around that."

Sam turned away from the window shaking his head soberly. "We're headin' into trouble. Folks in the Valley like Clay Porter. They ain't gonna take kindly to this."

"You can refuse the job," Pat told him with a shrug of his wide shoulders. "I can appoint another deputy to help me out of a tight spot."

"You know I ain't runnin' out on yuh," Sam flung at him angrily. "I'll do it, but I won't be likin' the job."

"Then we better be gettin' out there." Pat arose with alacrity and put on his hat. He led the way out to their horses and they mounted. "I reckon it'd be better for just the two of us to go first an' break the news to Clay," he mused. "Then you can ride back to pick up two or three hands to help you out."

"What do I need of two or three hands?" Sam demanded. "I hear Clay an' Dick have bin runnin' the ranch alone since Bill got stove up."

"Which ain't enough for a ranch the size of the Four-V's," Pat told him sharply. "Besides that, you'll have a lot of extra work roundin' up all the stuff and getting a count on it. That way, you'll know just what you're responsible for when you turn the place back over to whoever gets it in the end."

"Everybody knows Bill was runnin' a couple of thousand head."

"But the judge wants you to make an exact count right now so the Wilcox girl can't claim she didn't get all that was coming to her if she takes over the place."

Both men were silent for a time as they left the town of Dutch Springs behind them and jogged across the broad floor of the Valley.

Then Pat chuckled and asked, "How'd you make out with Ezra last night?"

"Purty good." Sam's leathery face broke from a moody

frown into a wide grin. "He stopped at thuh Gold Eagle for a couple more snorts while I was puttin' up yore hawse, an' when I got back I thought I'd hafta tie him in thuh saddle. But he sobered up on the way back an' wouldn't stop at thuh Lazy Mare. Rode on over to his place."

"Were the girls still up when you got home?"

"You know they was," scoffed Sam. "Long as you an' Sally have bin married, she'd never go tuh bed with you still out. They'd heard about the stage accident an' was mighty upset about Mr. Winters."

"You didn't tell 'em it was more than an accident?" Pat demanded.

"Hell no. I know more about womenfolks than that," Sam responded indignantly. "Sally's bad enuff worryin' about you havin' one murder on yore hands. If she knowed there was two, she wouldn't've slept a wink. She asked a lot of questions about the Wilcox gal," he added with a dry chuckle, "an' about you stayin' in town at the hotel with her. I fixed it though. I tol' her the gal weren't but a little mite purtier than she was when you married her."

"I didn't stay at the hotel with *her*," Pat said angrily. "Where'd Sally get a fool idea like that?"

"I shore dunno." Sam assumed a look of innocence like that of a new-born babe. "Couldn't of bin nothin' I said, I don't reckon. Though I did hafta think up some reason for you stayin' in town at the hotel, not wantin' to tell her about Winters an' that Dilson rannie you were trailin'."

"So you told her I stayed on account of the girl?"

"She sorta got that idee some way. You better carry out a box of candy next time you go home."

"A lot you know about bein' married," Pat ejaculated. "If I carry her a box of candy she'll be plumb sure I've been doing somethin' I'm ashamed of."

Sam threw back his head and laughed uproariously at his partner's discomfort. Then he sobered and asked, "What about Dilson? You get anything on him?"

"Not yet," Pat admitted grimly. "He could of done the stagecoach job all right, but I'll be damned if I can see any

reason why he should." He went on to tell Sam the information he had uncovered at Hopewell Junction—about Dilson riding out from the Junction on both Monday and Tuesday when he might have been getting the lay of the land and loosening the boulder, and about him leaving the Junction right after noon on Wednesday, hours ahead of the coach which he knew would be carrying Winters, and his story of resting his horse for an hour after the animal picked up a stone.

"Which don't make too much sense," Pat added grimly, "comin' from a man like I figure Dilson to be. A man that'd leave a team of broken-legged hawses without shootin' 'em ain't the sort to rest his own hawse an hour just because he's a little lamed. An' he acts mighty thick with Miss Wilcox and her fiancé," he went on with a worried frown. "I got a funny idea they knew each other before meetin' up by accident for a few hours in the Hopewell Junction Hotel."

"He claims to've rode down from Denver," Sam reminded him. "I reckon they come through Denver on the train gettin' here."

"They admit that, but claim they just stopped between trains. They got in Hopewell Junction Monday mornin', which means they must of left Denver Sunday mornin'. Dilson got to Hopewell Junction on Sunday on hawseback, so he must of left Denver three or four days before Miss Wilcox an' Munson got there."

"If he rode all tuh way," Sam agreed. "He could've took the train to Pueblo, bought a hawse there Sunday mornin' an' rode into Hopewell. That way, he could of bin in Denver Saturday."

"That'll bear checking," Pat agreed. "But what if he did run into them in Denver? What does that prove? Why would he want to kill Winters?"

"Mebby it was him that killed Bill Freeman," Sam suggested. "You say he was out ridin' around the Valley Monday evenin' when Bill was gettin' choked tuh death."

"He claims he stopped by the Square D for supper that night," Pat muttered. "That's a good five miles from the

Four-V's. I'll check on that too. But why the devil would he wanta kill Freeman," he groaned, "if he was in cahoots with Munson an' Miss Wilcox? *They* didn't want Freeman killed before she got to him."

"Mebby they did," Sam objected. "Mebby we're lookin' at this hull thing from the wrong end. Supposin' Freeman *wasn't* Wilcox," he went on, warming up to his idea. "An' they knowed it all thuh time. But they had this play figgered tuh get holt of his ranch. So they fix it with this Dilson to be at Hopewell Junction Monday afternoon while they ride in to Dutch Springs an' spill their story to you. They ain't worried about Bill Freeman sayin' it's a lie 'cause they've awready fixed it with Dilson tuh kill Bill 'fore they can get to him. Then they hafta kill Winters too, 'cause *he* knows who thuh real Wilcox is. So Dilson takes care of that job for 'em too."

"It don't stand tuh reason," Pat argued weakly. "If her father *is* here in the Valley why wouldn't she want to claim him instead of Freeman?"

"Mebby because her real daddy ain't got much money an' she knows thuh Four-V's spread is worth a lot of money."

"It still wouldn't work," Pat protested. "If her father *is* here and *isn't* Freeman, he'd come forward to claim her as soon as he heard she was in Dutch Springs lookin' for him."

"I guess yo're right at that," Sam agreed, disheartened. "I reckon I ain't much good at this supposin' bizniss."

"Anyhow," Pat said sharply, "she and Munson hadn't ever even heard of Bill Freeman till we told them about him in my office Monday afternoon. They didn't either one of 'em see Dilson after they talked to us until last night."

"I shore dunno. It's too big a mixup for me tuh make heads or tails of it. Yo're the sheriff anyhow."

"That's right. But I didn't figure on anything like this in Powder Valley when I pinned this here star on my shirt."

"You leave anybody in town ridin' herd on Dilson?" Sam asked him.

Pat shook his head. "If he's mixed up in this I've got an idea he'll stick around waitin' to be put in charge of the ranch

when they get hold of it. If he isn't, I don't care what he does."

Conversation between the two partners lagged as they approached the headquarters of the Four-V's ranch. Sam's face took on a moody frown again as he contemplated the distasteful business before him, and he unconsciously loosened his gun in its holster to be sure it was free for a fast draw if Clay Porter got ugly.

He didn't think Clay would go so far as making a gunplay, but you never could tell. Clay had a reputation throughout the valley for fearlessness and a violent temper, and he wasn't a man Sam would have cared to go up against alone. Still, Judge Bemis was right of course. It was quite proper to have some outsider take charge of the property until the legal business was settled. Clay Porter would certainly understand that and be reasonable, Sam kept reassuring himself.

Riding beside him, Pat noted his partner's increasing unease as they neared the Four-V's ranch, and he grinned to himself as he saw the stubborn set of Sam's chin, his unconscious gesture down toward his gun.

Pat wasn't particularly worried about Clay's reaction to their visit. The foreman would resent it all right, but Pat thought Clay had enough horse sense to realize he and Sam were only doing their duty in carrying out a court order. He didn't anticipate any real trouble in taking over control of the ranch. He was perfectly willing to let Clay remain as foreman, under orders from Sam. That way, he thought, Clay couldn't make any real kick. It wasn't like he was going to be put out of his job altogether. Any sane man would accept Judge Bemis' decision gracefully.

Clay Porter came to the front door and stood on the threshold frowning out at them as they rode up. He was bareheaded and in his shirtsleeves, without a gunbelt about his waist, and he was rubbing his eyes as though he had just awakened from a nap, though the sun was at least three hours high.

He nodded to them with a scowl as they swung off their horses, and demanded truculently, "What d'yuh want out

here now? Looks to me like you've made enough trouble on the Four-V's."

"Meanin' what?" asked Pat calmly.

"The way you've got the kid locked up in jail," Porter raged. "Arrestin' him for murder when all he done was get drunk. An' pawin' through everything here an' checkin' up on me like maybe I had a part in it."

"I was only doing my job," Pat told him quietly. He walked forward but Porter remained belligerently blocking the doorway.

"Awright, so you done yore job," Porter snarled. "What d'yuh want here now?"

"Don't you reckon it'd be better if we all went inside an' talked it over?" Pat asked reasonably.

"You can do yore talkin' right where you are. You an' yore runty pardner both," he added with a malignant glance at Sam.

Any reference to his size always made Sam Sloan bristle like a fighting cock. He took a step forward and said angrily, "I didn't wanta do this in the beginnin', but now by golly, I do believe I'm gonna enjoy it."

Pat said, "Wait a minute, Sam. Clay's on the prod an' there's no use pushin' him." He put a restraining hand on Sam's shoulder and went on to the man in the doorway, "We're here on official business, Clay. Sam's been deputized all proper, an' we both represent the law. Don't get too big for your britches."

Clay Porter's face flushed dark with anger, and it seemed to Pat there was a curious look of fear in his shifty eyes. But he blustered, "What does the law want with me?"

"We don't want nothin' with you, Clay. It's the Four-V's we're after. Sam Sloan's been appointed to take charge here by Judge Bemis."

"Who does Jedge Bemis think he is? What's he got tuh do with the Four-V's?"

"He's the top law-hand in the Valley and you know it," Pat told him quietly. "There's no need for you to take on

about it. It's not anything personal against you. Sam is just actin' on a court order like I say."

"I was put in charge by Bill Freeman, and I'm keepin' charge for Dick till you let him outta jail," Porter said wrathily. "Nobody's goin' to move me out."

"Nobody wants to," Pat assured him. "You can stay on as foreman under Sam. All the judge wants is to get a fair count of all the Four-V's beef stock by an outsider without any ax to grind. You won't even have to do any of the work," he went on hurriedly. "Sam'll gather up some hands an' make the count without botherin' you."

Clay Porter's reaction to this peaceable suggestion was abrupt and astonishingly violent. His face turned the color of raw beef and he snarled, "No yuh don't. Get thuh hell outta here an' tell Judge Bemis . . ." He ended with a trail of obscenities.

"That's no way to talk," Pat admonished firmly, dropping his hand from Sam's shoulder and starting forward.

Porter whirled about and disappeared inside the house. Pat stalked forward and stepped up on the porch. Without further warning, a shot rang out from the interior of the house and a bullet whammed into the door-facing less than a foot from Pat's head.

Pat leaped backward with a startled exclamation, throwing himself off the porch and drawing his gun.

Inside the house, Clay Porter's enraged shout warned them, "Hit yore saddles an' back to town. An' stay off this ranch from now on."

"I'll be plumb dagblasted an' goldurned," Sam Sloan muttered in an awed voice beside Pat where he also had fallen flat when the first shot was fired. "He's gone plumb loco."

"Looks like it," Pat said grimly. "We'll have to blast him out of there."

"What's the use of that?" asked Sam reasonably. "Let him stay holed up in thuh house. I can make my beef count without him helpin'."

"An' get somebody killed," growled Pat, shaking his head. "We got him cornered in there now. No tellin' what the

damn fool might do if we let him get out on the range loose."

"Awright," muttered Sam resignedly. "If we come at him front an' back there's a good chance of jest one of us gettin' killed. Which d'yuh want?"

"I'll take the back door," Pat decided. "You stay here off the porch with your head down. Lay quiet so he won't know where you are an' wait till you hear shootin' in the back. That'll give you a chance to come in after him."

They had been in too many gunfights together before for Sam to waste time arguing with Pat Stevens, though it was evident Pat had selected the more dangerous course of the two. That was always Pat's way, one of the penalties of leadership, and Sam obeyed orders like a good soldier. He remained close to the porch, hugged against the ground, while Pat crawled forward on his belly to the side of the house, then made his way cautiously around the corner and disappeared.

There was utter silence for a time. The sun was blazing hot on Sam's back and a red ant crawled up his arm and began a curious inspection of his neck. Then he heard Clay Porter shouting from inside the house in a baffled voice.

"Where are you-all at? It won't do yuh no good tuh play Injun tricks. I won't shoot while yo're mountin' up and ridin' off."

Sam lay as still as death. Clay's voice had come loudly through the open door not more than six feet away, and Sam tensed his finger on the trigger to be ready for a fast shot if the foreman showed himself for an instant. The red ant had reached the end of Sam's nose now. He seated himself there as though undecided about further explorations, and Sam decided he must be scratching himself.

It was almost unbearable to lie in the hot sun like that unmoving. His nose itched, and then he had a violent desire to sneeze. Salty sweat was running down into his eyes, blinding him so he wouldn't be able to shoot straight if Porter did offer himself for a target. The ant began a leisurely return journey up the bridge of his nose and Sam knew he couldn't stand it more than a few moments longer.

He heard Porter shout, "No, yuh don't!" and run toward the back door, loosing a fusillade of shots that were echoed by Pat's gun.

Sam flung himself onto the porch and through the open front door. He saw a moving figure outlined for a second in the rear hallway against the open back door, and he fired once from the hip.

Clay Porter went down and his empty gun clattered to the floor out of his hand. Pat charged in through the back door and was bending over Porter's unconscious form when Sam reached them.

"Nice shootin'," Pat said gruffly. "Through the left groin and into the belly. Doc Trimble can maybe fix him up."

Sam slowly holstered his smoking gun, shaking his head with a puzzled frown. "What got into him all of a sudden, Pat? There wasn't no call for him to go hawg-wild that-away."

Pat said heavily, "I don't know. It's just one more of a lot of things that I don't savvy. Saddle up a hawse an' we'll take him in to the doc."

14.

DOCTOR TRIMBLE WAS SHAKING his head dubiously when he came out to the front room where Pat and Sam had been waiting more than half an hour. He went to the sideboard and got a bottle of whiskey out of a drawer, poured a glass half full and downed it neatly. He shuddered and recorked the bottle, and then told them, "Clay may be able to pull through. I won't guarantee anything but I've fixed him up the best I can. You weren't very careful where you placed your bullet, Sam."

"It was a snap shot with both of us runnin'," Sam protested. "If I hadn't downed him he woulda been on top of Pat."

The rotund little physician nodded absently. "He hasn't regained consciousness. I doubt whether he will for several hours at least . . . if at all." He uncorked the bottle and poured another, more moderate drink. "What's going on here in the Valley, Pat? Two corpses and one near-corpse all within a couple of days. Was Clay resisting arrest when Sam plugged him?"

Pat shook his head soberly. "He didn't have any call to get wringy like he did. Sam was takin' over the Four-V's on a court order from Judge Bemis when Clay went wild and started slingin' lead. I dunno what got into him. I'd sure like to ask him a few questions. Might clear things up a little."

"Impossible," said Doc Trimble crisply. "He'll have to remain absolutely quiet for at least twenty-four hours."

Pat shrugged and got up. "I reckon we might's well be going along then. Let me know, Doc, first minute he's able to talk."

"I'm not promising he'll ever talk again," Trimble warned him. "He's got about a fifty-fifty chance of pulling through."

Sam and Pat went out of the doctor's house together, down the path to the three saddled horses standing in front. "I'll take this Four-V's hawse over to the livery stable," Pat said. "You better start lookin' around for some men to help you handle the Four-V's like the judge wants done."

Sam nodded. "I'll get right onto it." They separated there, Pat mounting his horse and leading the one on which they had brought Clay Porter's unconscious body into town.

At the livery stable behind the hotel, he turned the led horse over to the hostler. He turned to ride away, but came back before he'd gone very far. He dismounted and asked the hostler, "Have you got Charley Dilson's hawse stabled here?"

"That stranger that carries his gun on the wrong side?" Jim Tuttle asked.

Pat nodded, and Jim said, "He's back in the las' stall on the left. What's left of him. He was run plumb off his feet when Dilson brung him in last evenin'."

Pat nodded and went back to take a look at the big black horse Dilson had ridden into town with news of the stage-coach tragedy.

He was still gaunted from his run the preceding day, but he showed a vicious temper by rolling his eyes and snorting wickedly when Pat leaned over the edge of his stall to look him over.

There were still thick welts on his shaggy hindquarters where Dilson had quirted him unmercifully on his ride in, and his sides bore deep gouges from the Texan's spurs. He was branded 2XL on his left hip.

Pat went back to the front of the stable and asked the old hostler, "You ever see the brand 2XL on the left hip before?"

Jim Tuttle was a wizened little man of past seventy. He had lived in southern Colorado all his life, and in his younger

and more active days had been a horse-buyer for a firm in Denver. He wrinkled up his face at Pat's question, spat a stream of tobacco juice thoughtfully at a knothole in the opposite wall and said, "I recollect that's the brand the black is carryin'."

"That's right. I'm wonderin' if he came from anywhere around these parts."

"He's a mean un," Tuttle said shortly. "Been mistreated when he was a colt an' gettin' broke. Dave Harris south of Pueblo brands the 2XL. I'd never buy a hawse from Dave on account of he ruined his stuff breakin' 'em. Jest like that black was ruint," he added.

Pat said, "That's what I wanted to know." He went out and led his horse around to the front of the Jewel Hotel.

He found Charley Dilson at the hotel bar fondling a glass of whiskey. He turned to the sheriff with a sneer when Pat came up beside him, and said, "I hear you an' yore pardner had a little trouble out to thuh Four-V's."

Pat nodded shortly. "A little. Did you ride hawseback all the way down from Denver this trip?"

"Yuh don't think I walked, do yuh?"

"I'm askin'," Pat said evenly.

"Shore I did."

"How come," asked Pat, "you rode in here on a 2XL hawse that you bought in Pueblo?"

His question was purely a shot in the dark, of course. A horse from Dave Harris' ranch south of Pueblo could easily have gotten up to Denver and been purchased by Dilson there, but Pat couldn't get rid of his suspicion that the Texan and the two Easterners were mighty friendly to've first met for a short time in Hopewell Junction—and he hadn't forgotten Sam's suggestion that Dilson could have ridden a train to Pueblo and gotten a horse there for the trip on into the Valley.

But Dilson's answer disappointed him. "Shore, I bought that black jughead in Pueblo on my way through. Started out on a roan from Denver but I pushed him purty hard on thuh road an' plumb wore him down to a frazzle."

"Make good time down from Denver?" Pat asked idly.

Dilson showed his teeth in an unpleasant smile. He boasted, "I allus make good time on hawseback. Two days from Denver to Pueblo."

"Must of left Denver last Thursday," Pat commented.

"That's right. What's it tuh you, anyhow?"

Pat said, "I like to ask questions." He turned and stalked out, went up the stairs and knocked on the door of Paul Munson's room.

It opened and Munson glared out at him. The lawyer's lips were puffed and there was a dark bruise on the side of his chin from the sheriff's fists that morning. He tried to shove the door shut when he saw who his visitor was, but Pat put his foot in the crack and said, "Forget what happened this morning. I want to ask you a question."

"Ask it then," said Munson sullenly.

"When did you and Miss Wilcox reach Denver on the train?"

"I told you we were only there between trains."

"What day did you reach Denver?" Pat persisted.

"We arrived Saturday noon . . . and left for Pueblo Sunday morning on the next train out," Munson snapped.

Pat said, "Thanks," and went back down the hallway to the stairs. He knew there was only one train south from Denver each day, and it left Denver early in the morning. Even if he could prove Dilson had lied about riding a horse to Pueblo, the Texan would still have to have left Denver on the Saturday morning train to've ridden into Hopewell Junction Sunday afternoon. And if Munson was telling the truth, it appeared there was no possibility that the three had met prior to their meeting in Hopewell Junction.

Still, he was nagged by an uneasy conviction that Charley Dilson was somehow mixed up in the death of Winters. There were too many suspicious circumstances about the man to be all mere coincidences. The way he'd hung around Hopewell Junction for three days for no apparent reason, and then left on the road to Dutch Springs in plenty of time ahead of the stage carrying Mr. Winters to have reached the

previously loosened boulder in time to have pulled it down on the stagecoach; the fact that he admitted riding down to the floor of the canyon to inspect the wreckage, yet hadn't put the crippled team out of their misery; and those two not fully explained trips out from the Junction on Monday and Tuesday which could easily have been employed by him in selecting the spot and preparing the boulder for its murderous destiny.

Only one of those suspicious facts could be checked. Dilson's story of having had supper at the Square D spread on Monday. The Square D headquarters was at least fifteen miles across country from the point where the stage had been wrecked. If Dilson was telling the truth about that, it wasn't very likely he'd been scouting the stage road that same afternoon.

Pat went down the street to the Gold Eagle in the hope of finding some of the Square D riders in town, but inquiries proved that none of them had been in town that day. It was more than an hour's ride out to the Square D, but Pat felt he had to do something about solving the two murders, so he went back to the hotel and got his horse and started out.

He was lucky to find Jasper Bates at the Square D when he reached the ranch some two hours later. Jasper managed the ranch for the non-resident owner, and he was in one of the small wooden pens behind the big corrals treating a bawling calf for wire cuts when Pat rode up.

The sheriff dismounted and seated himself on the top rail of the pen and looked on interestedly while Bates smeared creosote over the gaping wounds and untied the calf. The ranch manager was a big man with a bald head that glistened in the sunlight as he walked over to Pat Stevens. They passed the time of day and each shared Pat's sack of tobacco to roll a cigarette, and Bates said his steers were fattening up good for market, and he added, "But that's not what you rode all the way out here for, I reckon?"

Pat said, "You're right, Jasper. I got somethin' else on my mind. Were you in town yesterday to hear about the stage bust-up?"

"Couple of the boys were," Bates told him. "Powerful bad news about Mr. Winters. He was a mighty fine man, Pat."

Pat agreed that the storekeeper certainly had been a mighty fine man. "Did either of your hands mention the stranger that first brought the news to town?"

Bates wrinkled his forehead and said he didn't recollect them saying anything about it.

"A line-ridin' rannie on his way through from Denver," Pat explained casually. "Carries his shootin' iron on the left side in a right-hand holster an' talks like he wasn't long from Texas."

"That must of been the fellow that stopped in here for supper Monday evening," Bates hazarded. "Riding a big black hawse with mean eyes. But that was Monday night. He was stopping at Hopewell Junction then and I reckon he would have rode on before yesterday."

"Same one," Pat told him. "How long was he here at your place on Monday?"

Jasper Bates thought back and said he reckoned Dilson had been around the Square D a couple of hours. "Rode up about five o'clock when the boys were just driftin' in from the range, an' wondered did I know any ranch hereabouts that might be looking to hire a foreman. I didn't, but I told him he was welcome to stay to eat chuck with us, an' put up in the bunkhouse for the night if he wanted. He ate supper but said he reckoned he'd ride back to the Junction for the night."

"What time would you say he left?"

"Right about sundown. Soon's he finished stowing away a passel of vittles."

"Headed back toward the Junction, huh?"

"That's right. He took off in that direction anyhow. Why do you want to know, Pat?"

"Did he talk any about any of the ranches around here? Like maybe he wasn't as much of a stranger as he made out?"

Bates frowned and admitted, "I can't say as he did. Asked a few questions about the ranches, like anybody would was they looking for a job."

Pat nodded and spun away his cigarette. "I'm just checkin' up on some things," he told Jasper Bates. "This makes one more thing that don't fit in nowhere."

He climbed down from his perch disconsolately, told Bates good-by and headed back toward Dutch Springs.

It was late afternoon when he reached town, and he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He tied his horse in front of the Winters General Store, intending to go in the lunchroom next door for a slab of apple pie and a cup of coffee, but he was hailed by Guy Jenson in the doorway of the store before he could carry out his intention.

Guy Jenson was a gangling young man in his early twenties with a prominent Adam's apple and a permanent stoop he had acquired from years of clerking in Mr. Winters' store. The death of his employer had thrown the whole burden of running the store and postoffice on his shoulders, and his voice was worried as he called out, "Can you come in here for a minute, Sheriff?"

Pat said, "Sure," and went up the steps and entered the store that was empty except for them.

"I got to ask you something," Jenson told him nervously, leading him back toward the small partitioned-off portion that served Dutch Springs as a postoffice. "I don't know much about government rules in the postoffice," the young man confessed. "You know Mr. Winters always took care of the mail. I've been doing the best I can to keep things going, but a letter came in today that I don't know what to do with.

"It's addressed to Bill Freeman," he went on, going back behind the partition. "I don't know whether I ought to send it back to Denver or turn it over to Dick, him being next of kin. Which do you reckon is right?" He reappeared with a long white envelope in his hand.

"I don't know much about the postal regulations either," Pat admitted. He held out his hand and asked curiously, "Who was writin' to Bill from Denver?"

"It's from some lawyers up there." Jenson handed him the letter as a rancher and his wife came in the front door.

"There's a couple of customers," he added. "I'd better go wait on them."

The letter was addressed by typewriter to "Mr. Bill Freeman, Dutch Springs, Colorado." It bore a printed return address in the left-hand corner: "Brook, Perkins & Flagstaff, Attorneys-at-law, Suite 216, National Building, Denver, Colorado." It was postmarked three days previously.

Pat turned it over and over in his hands indecisively. He wondered what a firm of Denver lawyers would be writing to Bill Freeman about. He wondered if it could maybe be something about Bill's will. There hadn't been any will among the papers in Bill's desk, and as Judge Bemis had pointed out that morning, a will might make a lot of difference in settling the estate between Dick and Miss Wilcox.

Pat Stevens made a characteristic decision and tore the envelope open. It might be against the rules, but he was the law in Powder Valley and he was confronted with two unsolved murders. He leaned back against the counter and read the letter with growing interest and excitement. It said:

"Dear Mr. Freeman:

"We regret to inform you that we have received word from our associates in New York that they have thus far failed to locate your daughter, Miss Joan Wilcox, in that city.

"Your previous communication to us on this matter, together with the family photograph which you enclosed as a means of identification, were forwarded by us to our New York associates, and they were empowered, per your request, to conduct an active search for the young lady.

"Having failed completely at the end of a three-month period, it is our regretful duty to advise you that it does not appear worthwhile to continue this investigation since it seems positive that the young lady and her mother have left the city during the ten years that you have not been in contact with them.

"If we may serve you further in this matter, we are wholly at your service, and continue to be your obedient servants."

The letter was signed, "J. D. Perkins."

15.

"I DON'T KNOW about the law on it," Pat admitted dubiously to Judge Bemis a short time later, "but I took a chance an' opened this up when I saw who 'twas from." He passed the letter across to the Judge. "Seems like it might be important to me."

The judge nodded slowly as he read the return address on the envelope. "Brook, Perkins and Flagstaff are a well-known and reputable firm. I don't know much about the Federal law on letters either, Pat, but we won't worry about that right now." He drew the folded communication from its envelope and read it carefully.

He pursed his lips when he finished and agreed, "This is important. It constitutes prima-facie evidence that Bill Freeman *was* the father of a girl named Joan Wilcox, proof of which has been lacking up to this point."

"Does that mean," asked Pat eagerly, "that she'll get the ranch?"

The judge leaned back and put his fingertips together. "It certainly strengthens her claim immeasurably. Bill Freeman's original letter to the Denver lawyers should establish his identity as William Wilcox beyond a shadow of doubt. If the girl can produce satisfactory evidence that she is, in fact, the daughter of William Wilcox, I'm sure any court would adjudge her to be the legal claimant of the Four-V's."

"Her name is Joan Wilcox," Pat pointed out. "Same as the letter says Bill's daughter is named. How else could she know

all about her daddy bein' here in Powder Valley under a different name, an' about Mr. Winters and all if she wasn't the right one."

Judge Bemis sighed. "I agree with you, Pat. I agree with you heartily. Everything points to her as the rightful heir. But there is such a thing as *legal* proof that must be considered. Look at it this way: An intelligent attorney representing Dick Freeman in a suit to settle the estate would contend that it is entirely possible the girl may be an impostor.

"Wait a minute now." The judge held up his hand to shut off Pat's remonstrance. "Remember, we're talking about *proof*. Not what you and I think. It could be pointed out that she might have been a girlhood friend of the real Joan Wilcox, and from her learned this story about Wilcox having settled in Powder Valley under an assumed name. She might be aware that her girlhood friend had died in the interim and there was no real claimant. She knows Wilcox hasn't seen his daughter since she was nine years old, and couldn't possibly recognize her now as a grown-up young lady. Do you see what I mean by *proof*, rather than surmises?"

"That's mighty farfetched supposin'," Pat grumbled. "She seems like a mighty nice girl to be accused of somethin' like that."

"I'm not accusing her of anything," explained the judge patiently. "I'm pointing out the legal difficulties she may encounter in proving her claim. Here's another small discrepancy, for instance." He tapped the letter in front of him. "This mentions the city of New York as the girl's supposed residence. Yet, I believe you said she told you she came here from Philadelphia."

"That's right. Like the letter says, it looks like she and her mother must of moved away from New York during the past ten years. That's why they couldn't find her in New York."

"Quite probable," the judge assented cheerily. "It's another point to investigate. If she had some letter from her father . . . something to prove she is Bill Freeman's daughter . . . she could go into court with nothing to worry about."

"That picture," said Pat suddenly. "That's it. Don't you

know she said her father had an exact copy of it? In that letter to Bill, they mention him sending them a copy of that same picture to use in identifying his daughter. Isn't that proof enough? Them both havin' a copy of the same picture?"

The judge hesitated. He reopened the letter and read it carefully again. "In this, they mention a 'family photograph.' It isn't identified further. We can *assume* it's the same picture, Pat. But assumptions are not admissable as evidence in a court of law. If we had that picture to compare with the one Miss Wilcox brought with her, I'd say that would be accepted as satisfactory evidence."

"They must have it in Denver. We could get it back from them."

"They probably have." Judge Bemis glanced at the letter again. "Though they say nothing here about returning it to Bill. It may be that the New York firm retained the photograph in their possession."

"We could get it back from them. Or, to save time, that lawyer in Denver should be able to look at the picture Miss Wilcox brought and say whether it's exactly the same as the one Bill sent him."

"That's true. His identification of her photograph would be acceptable evidence. But there isn't any great hurry, Pat. Probating an estate takes time, particularly if no will is found. I can write to Brook, Perkins and Flagstaff if you wish, setting forth the circumstances and asking for the return of the photograph as evidence."

"I'm in a hurry to find out about things for sure," Pat muttered. "I'm not worryin' so much about who gets the ranch as I am about two murders. Somebody had a reason to kill Bill Freeman an' Mr. Winters. I don't reckon I'll know who wanted 'em dead until I know whether Miss Wilcox is the right girl or the wrong one."

"I see. In looking for a motive, it's important to know who will actually benefit by their deaths," Judge Bemis nodded. "When we're considering that point, let's not overlook the possibility that Freeman left a will. This letter seems to indicate that Brook, Perkins and Flagstaff have been Freeman's

legal advisers for some time. I mean, the tone of the letter is such that I presume he has had previous dealings with them. To make a will, perhaps. It would be natural for Freeman to consult a firm in Denver on such a matter. Remember, he was keeping his real identity a secret here in the Valley, and in making a will he'd have to reveal that secret."

"But I didn't find anything like that in his desk."

"A desk that had been rifled after his murder," Judge Bemis commented dryly. "Perhaps his murderer found and destroyed it."

"Then there's nothing we can do about it now," Pat muttered.

"There are always two signed copies of a will," the judge told him. "The client takes one and the other copy is retained by the attorney who draws it up for him. If there ever was a will, you can be sure that Brook, Perkins and Flagstaff have a copy in their files."

"I'm going up to Denver," Pat announced suddenly. "I'll take this letter an' that picture along with me. That way, I can settle everything in one trip." He looked over at a clock on the wall. "I've got just about time to ride to Hopewell Junction an' catch that train into Pueblo. That'll give me a short layover before the Denver train comes along."

He got up and pocketed the letter, tugged his hat down over his eyes. "I hate to run off without tellin' Sally," he muttered. "She'll be madder'n a wet hen. Will you do me a big favor, Judge?"

Judge Bemis laughed and nodded. "You go along. I'll drive out to the Lazy Mare in my buckboard and make your peace with Sally by explaining how imperative the trip is."

Pat said, "Thanks, Judge. If you ever get in a tight I'll do the same for you." He strode out and hurried up the street to his horse, swung into the saddle and set out at a lope toward Hopewell Junction to catch the evening train.

The train rumbled into the depot at Pueblo at ten o'clock that night. With half an hour to spare before the Denver train pulled out, Pat Stevens went into the station restaurant and gulped down a hasty meal, then went out and stood for

a moment on the platform looking up the street leading into the business section of the city.

In the light of flickering street gas-lamps, he surveyed the signs on both sides of the street until he found the one he knew was somewhere in that first block. It was a big arched sign above a pair of wide double doors opening off the street. It said: "Ben's Livery Stable" and it was less than half a block from the railroad station.

Pat walked up there and found two men seated in a small office just off to the right of the big entrance doors. They were working over some ledgers spread out on a table in front of them. One of them was a skinny man dressed in overalls and sweaty work shirt; the other, heavy-bodied and well-dressed, chewing on an unlighted cigar.

The bigger man glanced up from the ledgers when Pat entered, smiled affably and asked, "Something we can do for you, Sir?"

Pat said, "I'm lookin' for the boss, I reckon."

"I'm Ben Hislip." He got up and held out a soft palm.

Pat shook hands with him, saying, "I'm Stevens from Powder Valley. I've just got a few minutes between trains."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Stevens. What can we do for you?"

"Do you sell saddle hawses here?"

"You bet we do. Sell 'em and rent 'em. Buy 'em and trade 'em. Saddle horses, buggy horses, work teams, or any sort of horse-flesh."

"Did you sell a black hawse wearin' a 2XL brand last Saturday?" Pat asked directly.

Ben Hislip frowned and took his cold cigar from between his lips to look at it as though it would give him the answer. "2XL is Dave Harris' brand," he muttered doubtfully. "We've had some of his stock in here. I don't know . . ."

"You'd remember this hawse," Pat told him. "A big mean-tempered black. Shows the whites of his eyes when a man gets close to him."

Hislip's doubtful expression cleared. He chuckled and nodded. "You mean that ornery critter? We were lucky to get

rid of him. Sure, I remember it now. I guess it was Saturday. Fellow that bought him kind of liked his mean looks. Said the meaner they were, the harder he rode 'em to take the meanness out. You recollect him, Dub?" he asked the stringy man who was still seated.

Dub looked up and nodded. "Had tuh ear him down tuh get the feller's double-rigged gear on him. Big feller wearin' a black hat an' shirt . . . with his gun turned wrong way frontwards."

"That's him," Pat said sharply. "Name of Charley Dilson. Did he trade in a busted-down roan on the black?"

Ben Hislip looked bewildered. "It was a straight sale, wasn't it, Dub? Forty dollars and glad to get rid of the brute. I don't recollect he traded in any horse."

"Didn't," Dub agreed. "Walked in here with his saddle over his shoulder."

"What time of day was that?"

"Right after four o'clock. Little after four, I reckon, 'cause I know the train from Denver had just pulled in. I know for certain 'cause I asked him did he come in by train an' he said he had. Asked the road to Powder Valley when he rode off."

The Denver train was clanking into the station half a block away. Pat hastily thanked the two men for their information, and trotted up the street to board the train before it pulled out. He knew at least a couple of things for certain now. Charley Dilson had lied when he said he had ridden horseback from Denver. Of course, he had mentioned pushing the roan pretty hard, and it was barely possible his mount had given out up the road some place, forcing him to finish the journey by train until he could reach the city where he could buy another horse.

But Pat didn't believe that was the answer. He was more than ever convinced that there was some mysterious hook-up between Charley Dilson and the young couple from the East, and that the Texan was somehow involved in the murders of Bill Freeman and Mr. Winters.

He didn't yet know how or what lay behind it, but he had

a strong hunch that the answers to those questions lay in Denver.

It was early in the morning when the train puffed into Denver. Pat was grimy and red-eyed from an uncomfortable night spent in the smoking car, and he walked directly up 17th Street to the nearby Oxford Hotel, one of the best known hotels in the city and patronized by practically every cattleman in the entire southwest when they visited the city.

The clerk in the Oxford knew Pat from previous visits to the city, and greeted him heartily, swinging the register around for him to sign and dipping a pen in the inkwell.

"A room with bath, Mr. Stevens? Will you be with us long?" he asked deferentially.

"I've got no need for a bath," said Pat with a grin, "not havin' any clean clothes to change into. I left in a hurry without any baggage," he added by way of explanation, "and I don't figure on staying more than overnight."

He kept the register open after signing his name. He studied the lined book for a moment and asked, "Do you use a new page each day?"

"That's right, Mr. Stevens. A pair of the double pages for each day."

Pat nodded and began turning the pages back, explaining, "I'm wonderin' if a friend happened to stop here last weekend."

"If he was in Denver I imagine he stayed here. Almost every rancher does."

Pat looked over the pages for the preceding Saturday but could not find Charley Dilson's signature. He shoved the book over to the clerk saying, "Maybe you can find it quicker. I think he left on Saturday to catch that train to Pueblo, but I don't know when he might of checked in. Name is Charley Dilson."

"Dilson?" the clerk murmured. "If he checked out on Saturday, I can find it here." He turned his back to open another ledger behind him, ran his finger down the entries and nod-

ded. "You're right. A Mr. Dilson did check out Saturday morning. He had been here five days."

"That," said Pat grimly, "is just about what I thought." He leaned an elbow on the desk and built a cigarette. "What's the fanciest hotel in town? You know. The one that a dude from the East would be most likely to stop at?"

"I'd suggest the Brown Palace," said the clerk promptly. "For anyone with plenty of money to throw away on fancy fixings. It's the most expensive hotel in Denver and it's been somewhat publicized in the East on account of the Presidential Suite that's supposed to be the finest west of the Mississippi."

"That's right up the street, isn't it?"

"Seventeenth and Broadway," the clerk told him. "I'll give you number three-twelve, Mr. Stevens."

"I won't bother to go up now," Pat told him. "Thanks." He went out onto busy 17th Street and strolled up the sidewalk toward Broadway. It was a trifle early, he decided, for a city lawyer's office to be open, and he might as well keep right on playing detective, seeing he was being so lucky at it.

Thus far, it had been a simple matter to trace Dilson back to the city and prove that he had lied when he told Pat he'd left Denver on horseback on Thursday. It was now definitely proven that he had gone to Pueblo on the train Saturday morning, but that still didn't prove that he could have met Paul Munson and Miss Wilcox in Denver. Not if Munson was telling the truth. He'd said they didn't reach Denver until Saturday afternoon—sometime *after* Dilson left on the train for Pueblo.

But it was evident, now, that Dilson had something to hide. Otherwise, why would he have bothered to lie about the day he left Denver? Pat's vague suspicion of Dilson was rapidly solidifying into a conviction that he was finally on the trail of something important.

The Brown Palace Hotel was an imposing brownstone structure built on a triangular plot of ground west of Broadway where 17th Street met it at an acute angle.

Pat was conscious of his rough range clothing, rumpled

and dirty after a night in the smoker, and he was a trifle awed by the quiet magnificence of the big lobby with its marble pillars and the breath-taking height of the domed rotunda extending all the way upward through the heart of the building.

There were softly cushioned chairs in the lobby, many of them occupied by well dressed gentlemen and beautifully gowned ladies who looked at him with raised eyebrows as he crossed to the desk.

The clerk was a tall, austere man, wearing a stiff collar and a gardenia in his buttonhole. He looked down his long aristocratic nose at Pat as the Powder Valley sheriff came up to him, and began to shake his head. "I'm quite afraid we have no vacancies, sir. I'm very sorry, but . . ."

"I'm not wantin' a room," Pat interrupted him. "The Oxford is plumb good enough for me to stay at. I wanta find out about a friend that I think was here last week-end."

The clerk looked properly incredulous, as though he didn't believe it was possible that a friend of this uncouth person had ever desecrated the Brown Palace, and he murmured, "I'm sorry, sir, but we are not allowed to give out information about our guests. It's quite irregular, don't you know." He lifted limp white hands and fluttered them in the air.

Pat unbuttoned his leather jacket to show the silver star pinned to the front of his shirt. "This here is law business," he growled. "I'm the sheriff from Powder Valley where we've had a couple of murders."

"Dear me." The clerk's pallid face turned two shades lighter. "Yes indeed, Mr. Sheriff. What can I do for you?"

"I wanta know if a man named Paul Munson an' a girl by the name of Miss Wilcox stayed here overnight last Saturday."

"Just one moment, sir, while I inquire." The clerk fluttered away behind a partition and returned in a moment, nodding. He glanced at a slip in his hand and said, "Mr. Munson and Miss Joan Wilcox from Philadelphia. They registered on Thursday afternoon and checked out early Sunday morning. They were assigned rooms on different floors during their

stay here. We're *most* careful about separating unmarried couples like that. I do hope there was nothing irregular. I assure you . . ."

"I'm not interested in what rooms they stayed in," Pat muttered, turned and made his way out.

This detecting business was plumb easy, he told himself exultantly as he left the hotel. Nothing to it. You just followed your nose and used a little common sense, and that was all there was to it. Now, he knew that Munson had also lied to him about the period he and Miss Wilcox had been in Denver. They had arrived Thursday afternoon, and Charley Dilson had not left for Hopewell Junction until Saturday morning.

Pat was now thoroughly convinced that both men had lied about it to prevent anyone from suspecting that they had met in Denver. Why? What did they have to conceal? Men don't lie about simple things like that without good reason. He was consumed with a fierce impatience now as he hurried down the street to the National Building.

16.

THE LAW FIRM of Brook, Perkins & Flagstaff had an entire suite of offices in the National Building. There was a reception room with chairs all around the wall, and a pert young girl at a desk who told Pat that Mr. Perkins was in his office but was busy and would he wait?

Pat said he would, and moved back to sit in one of the chairs. The girl had a typewriting machine on her desk and she turned back to work on it after Pat sat down. It was the first time he'd ever seen anyone working one of the machines and he watched with interest while her nimble fingers tapped the lettered keys and made words on the sheet of white paper on the roller.

After awhile she got up suddenly as though someone had called her, though Pat didn't hear anything, and disappeared along a corridor to the rear. She returned in about a minute and beckoned to him with a smile. Pat got up and she told him, "Mr. Perkins can see you now. The third door on the right."

Pat went back along the corridor to the third door on the right and went in. There was a big office with a blue rug on the floor, and a flat-topped desk in the middle of it. A chubby man with white hair and twinkling blue eyes sat in a chair behind the desk. Smiling affably, he got up and held out his hand as Pat walked in. "Mr. Stevens?"

"From Powder Valley," Pat told him. He shook Mr. Perkins' hand and pulled up a chair. "I'm the sheriff down

there," he went on, getting out the letter that Mr. Perkins had written to Bill Freeman and placing it on the desk in front of the lawyer. "That's the reason I'm here."

Mr. Perkins picked up the envelope and inspected the address. "Oh yes. My letter to Mr. Freeman. I presume he was quite disappointed by our failure to locate his daughter."

"Bill Freeman was murdered last Monday," Pat explained. "I opened that letter yesterday and after Judge Bemis and I read it, we thought I'd better come right up here."

"Murdered? Dear me. That is tragic news, Mr. Stevens. Mr. Freeman was a valued client and a fine gentleman. How on earth did it occur?"

Pat told him briefly, sketching in the salient facts about the appearance of Miss Joan Wilcox and her fiancé on Monday afternoon, the manner in which they had guessed Bill Freeman was the father the girl was looking for, and the way in which Bill had met his death.

He didn't mention Dilson or Mr. Winters, or his suspicions about Paul Munson, but explained, "It looks like Freeman was murdered on account of the girl comin'. That's the only motive we can see because Bill didn't have an enemy in the world that we know anything about."

"You say the young lady came from Philadelphia looking for her father, whose assumed name she didn't know?" exclaimed Mr. Perkins. "What a coincidence that she should have made up her mind after ten years to look him up just at the same time that Mr. Freeman had made the same decision in regard to contacting her."

"She claims she couldn't do it till after her mother died," Pat explained. "And I guess it's lucky for her that Bill did write you that letter about her because that's the only way we can be plumb sure he was really named William Wilcox."

"An amazing coincidence," Mr. Perkins repeated. "Yes, he's the man she was looking for all right." He pressed a button on his desk. "His letter to us states the facts very clearly."

The girl from the outer office came to the door and said, "Yes, Mr. Perkins?"

"Get me the correspondence file on William Freeman,

please." The girl nodded and went away, and the lawyer went on with an amazed shake of his head, "A pity he had to die before the reunion was effected. And what a shock to her! To lose her father on the very eve of finding him again."

The girl reentered the office with a stiff cardboard file which she placed in front of Mr. Perkins and then she withdrew. He opened it and searched for a moment, drew out a letter written in pencil and passed it across to Pat. "We had previous knowledge, of course," he explained, "that our client's real name was William Wilcox and that he had a wife and daughter in the East. We've handled several legal matters for him during the past ten years, including the adoption of a son and the drawing of a will in which the daughter is named. So this letter was not a great surprise to me."

Pat settled back and read Bill Freeman's letter with interest:

"Dear Sir:

"I had a rather bad accident lately, and am beginning to realize for the first time that the years are slipping up on me. I've had time to do a lot of thinking since I've been laid up, and I find myself wishing that I might be able to see my daughter again.

"I want you to try and find her for me. You have all the information about her, last place of residence, etc. Please have discreet inquiries made by some trusted person to ascertain the sort of young lady she has grown into, her personal feelings toward me, etc.

"Her mother may have turned her against me during these years so that there is no possibility of a reconciliation, and if this is found to be the case I prefer to let matters remain as they are now.

"If, on the other hand, she retains any love for me in her heart and it appears that happiness might result from the meeting, you are hereby authorized to advance her sufficient monies to make the trip out here, and urge her to make it soon for I have a feeling that I may not recover from this present illness.

"I enclose a picture of myself, wife and daughter taken more than ten years ago which might be helpful in positively identifying her, since an exact duplicate of this picture should be in her possession.

"Please spare no expense in carrying out this wish, and I pray that it may result happily for myself and my daughter."

The letter was boldly signed "William Wilcox" and beneath the signature was scrawled "Bill Freeman."

Pat Stevens looked up from reading the letter with a puzzled frown. "I sure didn't know old Bill could sling that kinda language," he protested. "I never heard him talk any different from the rest of us in the Valley."

Mr. Perkins smiled at him. "Don't forget that Mr. Freeman, or Wilcox, was a wealthy and educated man. Out here in the West, he adopted the slovenly speech common to other ranchers as a sort of disguise. His background was apparent only in his writing."

Pat nodded, though it was still difficult for him to believe that the Bill Freeman he had known had ever written all those big words. If it hadn't been for the scrawled "Bill Freeman" beneath the other signature he would have doubted the authenticity of the letter. But he recognized that scrawl. It was the way Bill always signed his name. Leaning back to make a cigarette, he asked:

"So you turned the job over to somebody in New York?"

"Our Eastern associates. The law firm of Pembroke and Peabody. I sent them a carbon of this letter with the photograph and a letter of explanation giving all the details which Mr. Freeman had entrusted to us years ago. They appear to have made a very thorough investigation, but without result. They were able to learn that Mrs. Wilcox and her daughter left the New York address some five years ago, and were unable to trace them to a new address. You say Miss Wilcox told you she came from Philadelphia?"

"That's right. It's not so far from New York, is it? Seems like they shoulda been able to find her there."

Mr. Perkins smiled. "Philadelphia is a huge city, Mr. Stevens. Almost as large as New York itself. If they had known to look there, of course, they could have checked all the Wilcox families in the city and eventually discovered her. But without that knowledge, it would have been quite impossible."

Pat nodded. "This settles who he was, all right. Have you got that picture he sent you?"

"I don't believe Pembroke and Peabody returned the photograph." Mr. Perkins searched through the file and shook his head. "No. It doesn't seem to be here. I daresay they retained it on the chance that Miss Wilcox would be found eventually and it would be needed there."

Pat explained, "Judge Bemis says that the picture the girl brought with her will be her best chance of proving she's the right one to claim Freeman's estate if it's the same as the one Bill sent to you."

"Judge Bemis is quite correct," Perkins agreed. "It will certainly be the best possible proof of her identity. I'll get off a letter to New York at once, explaining the circumstances and requesting the return of the picture."

"In the meantime," said Pat, "I reckon you looked at the picture when it came. Do you recollect what it looked like?"

"I recall it very well indeed," said the lawyer promptly. "It was a tintype. Somewhat faded with age. It was a conventional pose of a father standing beside a chair in which his wife was seated with the girl in her lap. His hand was on her shoulder, I believe. Mr. Wilcox had a pair of very impressive mustaches at the time the picture was taken, but aside from that the features were clearly recognizable as those of Mr. Freeman. The wife looked like the sort of woman who might well have made her husband's life as unhappy as Mr. Freeman described his as being."

Pat had listened intently to the lawyer's description of the picture Bill Freeman had sent him. He now asked, "If you saw a copy of that picture, could you swear it was the same one. I mean, even supposin' the one Bill sent you had got lost

or something, could you swear to it in court so's the girl could prove who she is?"

Mr. Perkins said, "I'm positive I would recognize it."

Pat drew from his pocket the faded tintype that Joan Wilcox had brought to Powder Valley. He passed it across to the lawyer, asking, "Would you say that's a copy of the one you saw?"

Perkins examined it carefully. He turned in his chair to let the light from a window fall across the surface, and took his time about answering. When he did so, his tone was quietly emphatic:

"That's a copy of the same picture, Mr. Stevens. If the girl had this in her possession there's no doubt that she must be the right Joan Wilcox."

Pat Stevens settled back in his chair with a sigh. He didn't know whether he was pleased or not. He was glad, for the girl's sake, that she was proven not to be an impostor, but it ruined a perfectly good theory that he had been working up to explain the murder of Bill Freeman. Since Bill had actually been her father, neither she nor Munson had any possible reason for desiring his death. Not, that was to say, before she had a chance to see him and be accepted by him as his daughter. She was his heir, of course, and if Bill had been murdered after the reconciliation took place, then she would have had a motive—if you could suspect a nice girl like her of planning her father's death just to inherit his estate a little sooner. And you wouldn't have to suspect her actually in that case either, Pat's thoughts ran on. Paul Munson was engaged to her, and he could have planned the whole thing without her knowing anything about it. He could've hired Dilson to do the job, just so she'd be rich and he could marry her.

But the timing of the murder was all wrong for either of them to be implicated. If Munson *had* planned it with Dilson, he would have waited until *after* Bill Freeman had seen and recognized his daughter. The way things stood, it was the merest coincidence that Bill's death had not deprived her of any chance to inherit the ranch. Neither she nor Mun-

son had any way of knowing that Bill had gotten lonely a couple of months ago and written that letter and sent the picture to Mr. Perkins. Without that picture for proof, she might never have established her claim.

Same way with the death of Mr. Winters too. They *couldn't* have desired his death. As far as they knew, he was the only man on earth who could prove that Bill Freeman was really named William Wilcox.

What, then, was Charley Dilson's part in the whole thing? *Why had Dilson and Munson both lied about being in Denver at the same time?*

This question stuck in Pat's head and he couldn't get rid of it.

After learning the truth at the Oxford and Brown Palace hotels that morning, he had become absolutely convinced that the two men had been in contact in Denver previous to their arrival in the Valley, and had some good reason for wishing to conceal that fact. The only good reason he could think of was that Munson had hired Dilson to commit murder, and therefore they didn't wish to admit any previous connection with each other. But this new development ruined that theory. Since Munson had no reason to desire the deaths of either Freeman or Winters, he certainly wouldn't have hired Dilson to do it.

Pat aroused himself from his brown study with a rueful grin at the lawyer who waited patiently for him to speak.

"You knocked me all in a loop," he admitted, "by identifyin' that picture. I've been buildin' up a murder case against the girl and her fiancé on the chance that she wasn't really Bill Freeman's daughter but was tryin' to get the ranch by claiming to be. I sure don't know where I stand now."

He hesitated a moment, then went on, "You mentioned fixin' up a will for Bill. When was that?"

"Soon after he adopted that boy," Perkins told him. "Under Colorado law, an adopted child doesn't inherit equally with a natural child if there is no will. Mr. Freeman wanted his adopted son to have half his estate, and he made a will to that effect."

"There wasn't any will found among his stuff," Pat explained.

Mr. Perkins frowned. "There should have been one. He had a copy of it."

"And you've got another copy?" Pat asked.

"Yes. That's normal procedure, you know. We retain a copy just to avoid any possible litigation should anything happen to our client's copy."

"An' it splits everything fifty-fifty between Miss Wilcox and Dick Freeman?" Pat persisted.

"Those are the main provisions of Freeman's will as I recall it."

Pat sank back into deep thought for a time. This gave Dick a further motive for ransacking his father's desk after Freeman's murder. He probably knew about the will and realized it would be proof of the girl's claim to half the ranch if it was found.

Pat sighed deeply and had to admit to himself that all he had succeeded in doing thus far was to build up an airtight case against Dick Freeman. Yet, Dick had been in jail while Mr. Winters was getting killed. Had there been *two* murderers at work in Powder Valley? It didn't seem very likely, but if Dick had killed his foster-father there must have been two.

Pat still couldn't get Dilson out of his mind. He *had* to be mixed up in it somehow. But how? What could his motive be?

Pat had a tantalizing feeling that the answer to the whole puzzle was just eluding him somehow. If he could only figure out some possible reason for Paul Munson wanting Freeman and Winters out of the way, it wouldn't be difficult to make out a strong case against Munson and Dilson working in cahoots.

He heard Mr. Perkins rustling the papers in the file on his desk, and looked up to see the lawyer select a letter and glance over it. Noticing Pat's attention, Perkins explained:

"This is the report we received from Pembroke and Peabody on their unsuccessful search for Miss Wilcox. I was

checking to see whether or not they mentioned retaining the picture in their office. U-m-m. Let me see." He turned back to the letter in his hands and nodded after a time.

"They state that they assigned one of their shrewdest young attorneys to the case and that he pursued the inquiry with the utmost diligence, giving it his entire attention for more than a month before admitting failure. They go on to say that they will consider the case closed unless a further effort is directed by our client. It appears that this decision to drop the inquiry may have been more or less influenced by the resignation from their firm of the young man who had charge of the matter. They explain that his file on the case appears to be misplaced and without his personal knowledge of the matter it would require a complete new beginning and retracing of ground should our client insist that the search be continued.

"That might indicate," said the lawyer with a frown, "that the identifying picture was also misplaced along with the file, but it is actually of no real importance. My own positive identification of this picture will be sufficient evidence to support Miss Wilcox's claim."

Pat got out his cigarette papers and tobacco and slowly rolled a cigarette. He had to work at it carefully because his fingers were trembling queerly and they threatened to tear the paper. After he licked it and twisted the end and put fire to it, he told the lawyer:

"All the same, just to be on the safe side, I reckon we'd better try to locate that picture. There's not another train to Pueblo until tomorrow mornin'," he went on thoughtfully. "Do you reckon you could send one of them telygrams to New York askin' about the picture an' get an answer back before I leave? Maybe if they can't find it in the office, the fellow that did the job has still got it."

"I can send a telegram and request an immediate reply," said Mr. Perkins, smiling at the sheriff's earnestness, "if you think it sufficiently urgent."

Pat drew in a long breath. "The county will foot the bill for it," he told the lawyer, "so don't skimp on the words.

Find out for sure while you're at it. If they don't want to bother lookin' up the man that's maybe got it, find out who he is an' where he's gone, an' maybe we can send him another one of them telygrams direct."

"Very well." Mr. Perkins became briskly businesslike and drew a memorandum toward him. "I'm sure you have the authority to make such a request. U-m-m. How does this sound?" He began composing a telegram to the law firm of Pembroke & Peabody in New York.

17.

LEAVING DENVER ON THE TRAIN the next morning, Pat Stevens reached Pueblo Saturday afternoon and was faced with the fact that no passenger train ran into Hopewell Junction on Sundays. In a fever of impatience to get back to the Valley with the important information he had gathered in the city, Pat hung around the railroad yards that evening and was lucky enough to find a string of empty cattle cars being made up into a freight train that was leaving late that night.

In his official capacity as sheriff of Powder Valley, Pat deadheaded a ride in the caboose and was thus able to reach the Junction early Sunday morning. He wasted no time getting his horse from the livery stable where he had left it on the preceding Thursday, and it was shortly after sunrise when he rode out of the Junction in a southwesterly direction, taking a direct route to the Four-V's ranch.

He didn't ride to the ranch house itself because he knew Sam Sloan would be out with his crew rounding up the Four-V's stuff and counting them, but he cut farther up into the foothills where he figured Sam would most likely be making his drive, and at mid-morning he came upon his partner and three other riders just about where he had calculated to find them.

The riders were holding a small herd of Four-V's steers in a coulee, working them out past Sam who sat on horseback checking them off in a tally-book as they filed past.

Sam looked up with a brief nod as Pat rode up beside him. He wet the tip of his pencil with his tongue and mumbled, "Lemme finish tallyin' this bunch an' I'll be right with you."

There were only a dozen or so more steers to be checked. Pat waited quietly beside him until the chore was finished. Sam closed his tally-book with a growl of disgust. "This ain't workin' out right a-tall, Pat," he complained. "We've worked this hull side of the ranch careful in thuh past two days an' ain't counted but a little more'n five hundred head. It's beginning tuh look like Bill Freeman didn't have more'n half the stuff we figgered on."

"Probably bunched up thicker south of here," Pat suggested.

Sam shook his head with a worried frown. "I'm bettin' we won't count more'n twelve hundred all told. I rode that south range Thursday afternoon 'fore we started our drive. Bill musta bin sellin' a lot of stuff lately."

Pat said, "Maybe. I don't think so. Call your boys off the job," he went on shortly. "We'll drop the count right now. Tell 'em to go on with the regular ranch work while you an' me ride into town."

"That'll waste two days' work," Sam protested. "If we quit now, those we got counted will mix in with the others an' we'll hafta do it all over again."

"I don't think there'll have to be a count," Pat told him grimly. "Not after we talk to some different people in Dutch Springs. Let's be ridin'."

Sam took time to issue instructions to the three hands who were helping him, and then turned disgustedly to Pat to ride back to town. "What kinda funny bizness is this?" he fumed. "First off you say we gotta have a count, an' then you call it off."

"We needed that work you've already done," Pat told him earnestly. "If the Four-V's herd is short like you say, that's the one thing I needed to tie this whole thing up in a tight knot."

"You mean you know who killed Bill Freeman an' Mr. Winters?" Sam asked eagerly.

"I'm pretty sure I know the whole of it. How's Clay Porter makin' out?" Pat went on abruptly.

"Purty good, I guess. I seen Doc Trimble las' night an' he said Clay'd get well."

"Done any talkin' yet?"

"Not a word, Doc says. Jest lays there with his mouth tight shut an' won't talk tuh nobody."

Pat nodded and pushed his tired horse to a lope. "Let's ride on in an' get this here over with."

They stopped in front of the adobe jail in Dutch Springs first. Pat swung off and unlocked the barred door, called, "Come on out of there, Dick."

Dick Freeman emerged truculently, his young face twitching nervously while he blinked at the sudden glare of bright sunlight in his eyes.

"It's time you was gettin' around to me. Decided to turn me loose, huh? I heard Clay was shot bad. I reckon he told you the whole thing, huh?"

"Clay has talked plenty," Pat told the youth. "We know where you got all that money you've been gamblin' so free with these past two months. Rustlin' off your dad's cattle an' sellin' 'em while he was laid up with a hurt back. Layin' off all the other hands so you and him could run off half the Four-V's herd."

"'Twas all his idea," whined the lad. "He figgered it out after Dad got hurt. I didn't do nothin' so wrong 'cause the whole she-bang will b'long to me now that Dad's dead."

"That's what you figured on," said Pat scathingly. "Until the girl came along from the East an' upset the applecart. That put you an' Clay in a tight. You knew she was Bill's daughter and would get the ranch. With her takin' over, you an' Clay's rustling would be found out. You had to do somethin' right quick to prevent that from happenin', didn't you?"

"Clay saw right away what'd happen," Dick admitted shakily. "I didn't know what to do. Clay thought it all up. He was plannin' it right there at the hotel that evenin' when he said Dad was too sick to see the gal."

"Plannin' to kill Bill Freeman before the girl could get to him?" Pat demanded.

"Yes." Dick hung his head. "He talked me into it," he said wildly. "He filled me full of whiskey ridin' back to the ranch and I didn't know what I was doin'. He showed me how nobody could ever prove Dad was the gal's father if he was to die before he had a chance to tell anybody. I was scared to tell the truth the next morning."

"Bein' full of whiskey when you killed your dad isn't goin' to help you none," Pat told him sternly. "You'll hang just the same."

"Not me!" Dick looked surprised and frightened. "I didn't do nothin'. I was so drunk I didn't even hear it when Clay killed him. I knew he'd done it like he planned, next mornin' when I saw Dad layin' there, but I was scared to tell you."

"What about Winters?" demanded Pat. "What good was killin' Bill Freeman as long as Winters knew Bill's name was Wilcox?"

"Clay said he'd take care of Winters too," Dick admitted. "I dunno what happened after you jailed me. They say Mr. Winters was killed in a stagecoach accident. Maybe so, but I know Clay was figgerin' on killin' him anyhow. If it weren't really an accident . . ."

"It wasn't," Pat said shortly, disgust plainly evident in his voice. He turned to Sam and directed, "Take him along with you an' hunt up Judge Bemis. Take 'em both over to Doc Trimble's where Clay Porter is an' we'll have him repeat this story in front of the judge and Clay."

"Where'll you be?" Sam asked as Pat swung into the saddle again.

"I'll be there with some others that'll be interested in this, too," Pat promised. "Miss Wilcox has got a stake in what's left of the Four-V's, and I reckon her and Munson and their friend Dilson deserve to be in on the finish since they've all been what you might call suspects in a manner of speakin'."

He spurred his horse away toward the hotel while Sam told the frightened boy, "Trot along ahead of me toward the

judge's place. You ain't worth wastin' a hunk of lead on, but I'll shore do it if yuh make a wrong move."

At the Jewel Hotel, Pat found Paul Munson and Miss Wilcox sitting together inside her hotel room with the door open. He stopped in the doorway and told them, "Everything's gettin' cleared up in a hurry. I've been to Denver checkin' on your claim to the ranch, Miss Wilcox, and now we know for a cinch that Bill Freeman was really William Wilcox an' he had a picture of him an' his wife an' daughter just like the one you brought with you from Philadelphia."

She looked happy and interested, and Paul Munson got up slowly with a smile breaking over his face. "I'll have to apologize, Sheriff. I had an idea you were against us. That you were doing your best to deprive Miss Wilcox of her rights."

Pat said, "All I wanted all the time was to find out the truth. If you-all will come along with me," he suggested, "I'm meetin' Judge Bemis to hear a confession from Clay Porter and Dick Freeman. And I'll tell the judge about the lawyers in Denver that know all about Bill Freeman bein' named Wilcox."

"Come along, Joan," said Munson enthusiastically. "Do you realize what this means? We're through sitting around this hotel. You should be able to take possession of the ranch at once, and you can arrange to sell it and get out of here."

"I'd like to have Charley Dilson along too," Pat told them. "I reckon you want him to take charge of the ranch?"

"Yes," Munson agreed. "By all means. Mr. Dilson should be in on this too. He's just been waiting for the affair to be cleared up. I imagine he's down at the bar," he added.

Pat stepped back and said with a grin, "I reckon it'd be best for you to tell him what we want. He's got an idea I'm tryin' to pin somethin' on him, and he's liable to try out a left-sided draw if I walk in on him. An' there's been too much killin' in Powder Valley already," he added.

"I'll get Dilson from the barroom and assure him he's in no danger from you," Munson offered eagerly. "Come along, dear."

Sam Sloan, Dick Freeman and the judge were just entering the doctor's house when Pat reached there with the others. Doc Trimble came trotting out from the back and demanded of Pat, "What sort of convention is this? I've got a sick man in the back."

"He's the one that's going to get nominated," Pat told him with a grin. "Is Clay able to have visitors?"

"Too much excitement won't be good for him," grumbled the doctor. "Back this way if it's necessary."

He led the way back through his office to a bedroom in the rear where Clay Porter was stretched out under a thin blanket. There was only one chair in the room, which was crammed full when all the visitors had pushed in.

Clay didn't speak a word of greeting to any of them. His face was drawn and haggard, and his eyes flickered angrily over each person as they entered.

Pat waited until they were all inside before telling Judge Bemis cheerily, "I asked you an' all the others to come here for the showdown, Judge, because I wanted to get this over with an' Clay Porter is too sick to be moved." He moved near the head of the bed and went on quietly:

"I don't blame you for tryin' to keep Sam from countin' the Four-V's stuff, Clay. They don't total up much more than a thousand head. That's why Clay an' Dick figured they had to get rid of Bill Freeman in a hurry," Pat went on to Judge Bemis when Porter didn't reply. "They'd been rustlin' the beef stock and knew there'd be a count if Miss Wilcox proved her claim an' moved in with Bill.

"They had to get rid of Winters an' Bill both," he went on calmly, "hopin' there'd be no one left to prove that Bill's real name was Wilcox."

Miss Wilcox and Paul Munson stood close together in the background, listening with interest. Sam Sloan slouched in the doorway beside the saturnine Charley Dilson, while the judge and a miserable-looking Dick Freeman stood at the foot of the bed.

"They must not have known about the letter Bill had

written to the lawyers in Denver," said the judge in response to Pat's statement.

"I reckon they didn't. All that killin' went for plumb nothin'," Pat told Porter angrily. "Bill had already sent a picture of himself and his wife and girl to a Denver lawyer, tellin' him the whole story. Miss Joan Wilcox will get the ranch anyhow."

Porter remained stubbornly silent, tightening his lips and half-closing his eyes.

"Dick is ready to spill the whole thing," Pat told the judge. "How Clay got him drunk ridin' home Monday night an' choked Bill Freeman to death while Dick was too drunk to even know about it. An' then . . ."

"He's a dirty lyin' louse!" Clay Porter lifted himself on one elbow and glared at Dick. "I never touched Bill Freeman. I never went in the house that night. It was him that did it . . . after he'd drunk enough courage out of a whiskey bottle. He talked me into it. I had to go ahead an' kill Winters after he'd murdered Bill, jest to help him out, by God."

"I didn't neither," quavered Dick Freeman. "I didn't even see Dad that night. Oh, I knew he was gonna do it," the boy sobbed out. "I'm to blame for not stoppin' him. But I wouldn't kill Dad. I couldn't've done that. He was allus good to me."

"Of all thuh snivelin' little liars I ever heard," said Clay Porter malignantly, "you're it. I reckon I'll hang for pullin' that rock down on thuh coach an' then finishing Winters off with a rock, but I ain't gonna take thu blame for yore part. You went in thuh house that night swearin' you'd get Bill Freeman, an' as soon as I heard about him next mornin' I knew you'd done it."

"Wait a minute," said Pat suddenly. "Didn't you bust open Bill's desk either, Clay?"

"Course I didn't," was the scornful reply. "I wouldn't of had tuh bust it open if I wanted tuh get into it. I knew where the key was."

"That's right," Pat agreed grimly. "And so did Dick know

where Bill kept the key. But somebody busted it open after Bill was dead. Some stranger maybe." He turned and nodded to Sam Sloan in the doorway, and said to Dilson, "How about you tellin' us where you rode after you left the Square D at seven o'clock on Monday night."

Dilson started. His eyes narrowed and his hand started to creep toward his holstered gun.

Standing close beside him, Sam Sloan rammed the muzzle of his .45 in the Texan's ribs. "Jest keep yore hands where they are an' answer Pat's question."

"I rode back to the Junction after dinner," said Dilson sullenly.

"After visitin' the Four-V's first?" asked Pat pleasantly. "You found Bill finishin' supper an' drunk a cup of coffee with him, didn't you? Then choked him to death an' broke open the desk lookin' for a will that he might of left namin' an adopted son to get half the ranch.

"I found out about that will in Denver," Pat went on apologetically to Judge Bemis. "Seems like the Colorado law is that an adopted child don't inherit equal if there's not a will. I reckon a lawyer like Paul Munson would of known that so when he hired Dilson to get rid of Freeman, he also told him to look for such a will an' tear it up if there was one."

His words fell like a bombshell in the quiet room. Dick stopped his sobbing and turned an amazed look on the Eastern couple. The girl went quite white and swayed forward, holding onto Munson for support, and he took an angry step forward, demanding, "What sort of talk is that? I didn't meet Dilson until Monday morning in Hopewell Junction. That was before Joan or I had even heard the name her father was using here. It was Monday evening before you told us Bill Freeman was the man."

Pat said calmly, "You met Dilson first in Denver. Both of you lied about what time you left Denver. You talked to him Friday afternoon in the Silver Dollar Saloon on Larimer Street, an' I can prove it."

Munson shrugged and said, "Suppose I did? Is that any

crime? I knew my fiancée might be inheriting a valuable ranch, and I wanted a man who was capable of taking charge of her interests."

"You both lied about it," Pat reminded him. "You both pretended you were strangers in the Hopewell Junction Hotel on Monday."

"I thought it would be best if he just seemed to drift in here casually," blustered Munson. "It might have looked queer if folks had known I'd hired him in Denver beforehand."

"It does look queer," Pat assured him dryly. "Plumb queer, the way we know he was over at the Square D, five miles from the Four-V's, just about half an hour before Bill got strangled. An' the way Bill's desk was busted open an' the will givin' half the ranch to Dick was stolen."

"But I've pointed out to you that I couldn't possibly have arranged any such thing with Dilson beforehand. I had no way of knowing what name Joan's father was using here."

"Maybe," said Pat, "you did know beforehand."

"Wait a minute, Pat," interjected the judge reasonably. "I don't see that you have any grounds for such an accusation. What could have been the motive? You say the Denver lawyer can identify that picture of hers as being the same as the one Freeman had previously sent him. That proves her claim to the ranch. What purpose would have been served by Freeman's death *prior* to his recognition of her as his daughter?"

"That's right," said Pat. "I reckon it's time we did a little more talkin' about this here picture." He pulled the faded tintype out of his pocket and held it up as he spoke. "It'd be right nice," he said gently, "if we could compare this one with the copy that Freeman had. How about helpin' us out on that, Munson?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talkin' about the picture just like this that was sent to the law firm of Pembroke an' Peabody in New York an' got lost up there. Where is it?"

"I don't know. What makes you think I should?"

"Pembroke an' Peabody do," Pat told him. He put the tintype back in his pocket and drew out a telegram. "This here," he told Judge Bemis, "is from the New York lawyers in answer to one we sent 'em from Denver. It's right interstin'. I'll read it."

He read aloud: "Regret to report the picture in question appears to have disappeared with our file on the case. Thus far have been unable to contact Paul Munson who handled investigation for us and subsequently resigned. Will renew our efforts to locate Munson and keep you informed of developments."

Pat Stevens looked up from reading the telegram and said acidly, "That's why I reckon you know plumb well *this here* is the picture Bill Freeman sent to New York, Munson. An' that's how you knew who Bill Freeman was all the time an' hired Dilson to murder him the same day you got here so's he couldn't ask your fiancée a lot of questions she couldn't answer an' prove she was lyin' about her name bein' Joan Wilcox."

"Oh, Paul," the girl sobbed frantically. "They know everything! I told you . . ." She fell forward in a dead faint.

At the same moment, Charley Dilson leaped forward with an angry exclamation, making a desperate grab for his gun.

There was a muffled report at the same instant, and he pitched forward on his face, leaving Sam Sloan standing in the doorway with a smoking .45 in his hand.

Pat nodded calmly to his deputy and said, "I hope you put that one through his heart, Sam. Powder Valley has still got the expense of tryin' Clay Porter for the murder of Mr. Winters; and Munson an' the girl for plannin' an' hirin' Dilson to murder Freeman. An' there'll be some sort of charge slapped onto Dick too, I reckon," he added, "for keepin' his mouth shut after he thought Clay had killed Bill. On account of his not speakin' up right then, Clay thought he'd done it, and went ahead an' killed Winters."

Paul Munson had sagged back against the wall, defeated and trembling. "It looked easy," he said shakily. "It looked like a perfect opportunity. I had that picture for proof, and

all the facts in the case to bolster up Joan's claim. The real Miss Wilcox is living in New York," he went on brokenly. "I located her without much difficulty soon after being assigned the case. But she's rich. She didn't need any more money. Joan and I wanted to get married. So I just pretended I couldn't find Joan Wilcox and she doesn't know yet that her father was searching for her. I . . . guess it was all a terrible mistake. But I thought we could fool you yokels without much trouble."

Pat nodded grimly. "You'll be a long time in jail findin' out just how bad a mistake it was, Munson. Come on, Sam. Doc Trimble ain't going to like all this excitement for his patient."

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